The Saintly Madman in Tibet

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One of the most fascinating characters that runs through the oral and literary traditions of Tibet is a tricksterlike figure that is perpetually engaged in one sort of perverse activity or another — drinking to excess, fornicating, thieving, defying authority, playing magical tricks. In short, this character is a sociopath of the first order, who displays all the behavior that Tibetans purport to disdain. Aside from the obvious humor and ribald good fun the figure engenders, however, there is also a serious side to him. When Tibetans are questioned about the motivation and meanings of these figures, they almost invariably say that they behave the way they do because they are really Buddhas.

Although this may seem to be at variance with what most of us would assume Buddhahood to mean, we hope to demonstrate that this figure, the saintly madman, is a symbol of the Tibetan Tantric and Yogic tradition — a complex assemblage of multiple historical movements and scholastic traditions. His actions resolve a central problem of meaning that involves the disjunct relationship between the ideals of Buddhist theology and the realities of everyday life. Gombrich (1971:321ff.) has characterized this relationship as a tension between the cognitive/life-denying and affective/life-affirming ideals of Buddhism, and much of Tibetan religious and ritual life is directed toward the reduction or transformation of this tension.

The doctrinal presentation of this notion is found in the concept of the Two Truths (bden-pa gnyis). The Two Truths are transcendental truth (don-dam gyi bden) and relative or phenomenal truth (kun-rdzob kyi bden). The distinction is absolutely fundamental to Mādhyamika and thence to Tantric philosophy. Since Mādhyamika teaches that all things

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are essence-less, it follows that there are no differences between phenomena and noumena, subject and object, and so forth. The realization of this subtle but fundamental fact leads one inevitably to salvation. Yet the process of discovery is difficult in the extreme, and according to Tibetan savants, defies all simple explanation. Phenomenal existence and relationships tend to overwhelm us and enmesh us in the karmagenerating entanglements of the world, leading us to the deceptive view that phenomena are ultimately real. This gives rise to errors in critical thinking, for, in the Mahāyāna view, phenomenal truth is artificial and compounded (bcos) and only absolute truth is real. Ordinary people are unable to see this difference critically and are thus easily confused. Phenomenal truth then arises through the obfuscation (sgrib-pa) of one's perceptual powers, occurring when one regards some object or set of relationships between objects and the self, and believes it to be integral, existing in and of itself, and having true significance. The obfuscation continues when the person acts in accordance with that false belief, piling action (and hence karmic result) upon "obscured" perception, thus becoming further enmeshed in his own error.

Second, and perhaps more problematic, is the fact that religiously unsophisticated persons, imperfectly comprehending the doctrine of the Two Truths, then create a radical and false separation between them. Salvation becomes reified as having an ontological status unto itself, something "out there"; thus objectified, salvation becomes a lost cause, and man is committed to spin out his samsaric existence endlessly. A Bon text (Snellgrove 1967:117) states the problem elegantly.

By force of deluded karmic events, with no knowledge and no understanding they regard spirit, thought, and mind as three separate parts.

Not understanding the void nature of the non-self, the knowledge, which is non-self, they conceive as two selves.

One they assert to be the innate divinity.

One they assert to be the innate demon.

Gods are of help to them and demons do harm.

Good and evil, cause and effect, white and black are seen,
and they experience the sufferings of the master of death, the Lord of the Dead.

Thus they conceive of one as many.

Equally important is the role that phenomena and phenomenal truth play in Mādhyamika-Tantric practice. Here, however, the emphasis is clearly on the transformative capacity of the phenomenal world. Whereas the scholastic approach to transcendentalism in Buddhism teaches that involvement with the world is polluting, sinful, and counterproductive in terms of salvation, in Tantric practice phenomena may serve as vehicles toward salvation, because they are ultimately devoid of meaning. Since man is endowed with Buddha-nature, his activities are logically imbued with the same potentiality, and hence mundane activity performed with an awakened mind is thus transformed into spiritual or salvation activity.

With this background we may now turn to the saintly madman with the

purpose of seeing how this strategy works.

To begin with, Tibetans consider certain states of mental abnormality to originate in demonically caused harm (gdon). All such states are related to seizure by a specific type of demon. Regardless of whether this seizure is directly or indirectly caused by demonic interference, it results in the imbalance of the humors that control both somatic and mental

health. The categories to be briefly discussed are as follows.

1. Bdud-mo or Gson-'dre [witch]. In folklore witches usually play the role of "bad mother" or "bad wife." In real life, witches tend to be identified as "bad neighbor" or as women playing somewhat marginal roles, such as rich women traders. There is also a related category known as phra-men-ma, usually characterized by pious women who spend all their time in prayer and other religious activities, but whose thoughts turn evil and unconsciously harm other people. On the basis of several cases of "real" witches known to our informants, we can state in a preliminary fashion that the category is roughly equivalent to schizophrenia. Alternating with violent and aggressive behavior, the victims are characterized by autistic withdrawal from their environment, loss of speech, and occasional episodes of hyperphagia and coprophagia. In terms of social relations this seems to symbolize two types of antisocial acts, withdrawal from interaction and eating too much of too many horrible things. Witches are always depicted as cannibalistic, and at their gatherings they are supposed to gorge themselves on human and animal corpses.

2. Bla-'khyer [soul-loss]. The bla is the indigenous "soul" (as opposed to the Buddhist rnam-shes [the transmigrating consciousness]. It is the life element that can be lost or stolen by demons, the wandering soul, the vengeful soul, and so on. Typically a person loses it through fright, especially through seeing a demon — such as a witch — in its real form. The loss of the bla is characterized by acute depression, the loss of appetite, inertia, and a wasting torpor that may eventually result in the death of the victim. The bla can be recalled ceremonially (bla-'gugs tshe-'gugs), and its restoration usually means recovery for the victim.

3. Sems-skyon [mind-fault]. This category includes what appear to be several forms of both neurosis and psychosis. It is associated by Tibetans with real worry, guilt, and anxieties of various sorts. The cause is attrib-

uted to spirit invasion of the "veins" (rtsa), and it is generally cured by tying a blessed thread around the affected part of the body.

4. *Grib-smyo* [pollution madness]. This is characterized by hysterical paralysis and/or chronic illness that can lead to death by causing, among other things, soul-loss. *Grib* is the morbid fear of polluting things, either

objects, persons, or encounters with demons.

5. Rlung-smyo [wind madness]. Described as rlung ni sems la phog [the (humor) wind striking the mind], the victim cries, sings, dances about, and becomes enraged with little or no provocation. His behavior makes him a public nuisance; he is sociopathic and constantly accusing people of being guilty of crimes against his person, accosting them in public, and so on. Interestingly this often takes place in the context of exchange, for the victims are often beggars. Such a victim accused one of these writers of attempting to poison him by giving him food fetched from indoors, instead of some that lay plainly in sight. We should note here that the rlung-smyon-pa [madman affected by rlung] seems to form a polar contrast with the witch. Whereas the latter is autistic, withdrawn, and hyperphagic, the former is outgoing, bellicose, and afraid of eating (being poisoned). They represent two extremes of socially dysfunctional behavior: both of them are unable to maintain the balanced presentation of self required in the interactions of everyday affairs, and both are unable to cope with food, the principal medium of sociability.

6. Rtsa-smyo [vein madness]. A specific form of rlung-smyo, it is characterized by nymphomania in women, coprolalia, echolalia, echopraxia, and "jumping madness." It seems very likely that this is the Tibetan version of the same complex of mental disorders commonly found in Northern Asia and around the Pacific Rim: problokto among the Siberian Eskimo, olan among the Tungus, wenkeiti among the Koryak (Czaplicka 1914:309-325); carmoriel and irkunji among the Yukaghirs (Jochelson 1910:30-38); menerik among the Yakuts (Levin and Potapov 1956:269); bilench in Mongolia, latah in Malaysia, and arctic hysteria in the New World (Aberle 1961). Of these Aberle writes, "It would appear that the latah is defending himself in various ways against the fear of being overwhelmed" (Aberle 1961:474) ... and ... "the latah's problem is one of disturbance and ambivalence with respect to submissive behavior" (Aberle 1961:475). The Tibetan case would seem to bear out these findings. In our case the madman may be said to become "overwhelmed" by the tensions that attend social interaction and relationships, especially face-to-face (submissive) relationships.

7. Chos-smyo [Dharma madness]. This is characterized by the same symptoms given under rlung- and rtsa-smyo, but it is confined in its use to

clergy. It is attributed to the unsuccessful practice of meditation and is said to befall the practitioner who exhibits self-doubt. Any scruple or

hesitation (rnam-rtog) shown by an unthoroughly trained meditator

leaves him open for demonic attack. Demons, who are threatened by religious activity and who have the ability to read men's minds, regard such activity as dangerous to their own existence, and they are always at the ready to prevent a person from attaining religious or salvation goals. Chos-smyon-pa often accost persons both verbally and physically, trying to engage them in debate, and admonishing them for their sins and ignorance of the doctrine: clearly a projective defense mechanism which enables them to cope with their own failures, "by going over to, identifying with the stimulus" (Aberle 1961:474). It is said, however, that chos-smyon-pa are clever and especially well trained in debate and logic. This is indeed the case, since they must have been initially at an advanced scholastic stage to have engaged in meditative practices at all. This form of madness was recognized historically at an early date in Tibet. The canonical commentaries, the Bstan-'gyur, contain a section on the removal of harmful demons. One text (Ye-shes-rdo-rje n.d.) gives the following characteristics: singing, playing, dancing, wailing, bellicosity, insomnia. This is said to be caused by an excess of the humors: "Loud and excessive speech are the products of phlegm," and so forth. Standard cures, involving drugs, offerings, and diet are prescribed at astrologically correct times.

The words *smyo-ba* [madness] and *smyon-pa* [madman] have several other connotations which we should briefly examine before we turn to the saintly madman. They may apply to animals, as in *khyi-smyon* [mad dog] or to animal rage. They also designate in a loose sense someone who is similarly furious or enraged, or a person who openly courts disaster by doing stupid things, such as defying sacred tradition, demons, or local spirits, or performing proscribed tasks on astrologically bad days. The verb *myos-pa*, a cognate of the nouns discussed above, designates derangement of the senses, whether it be through liquor, drugs, or one of the physical senses, e.g., "maddened with thirst." Wine or beer is referred to in many texts as *smyo-chu* [water which maddens], whose use dulls the senses, turns one belligerent, removes one's sense of morality, and so on (Dpal-sprul 1971).

8. Bla-ma smyon-pa [saintly madman]. The mad saint is a figure of some importance in Tibetan popular religious literature. Although the three best known saintly madmen — Dbus-smyon, Gtsang-smyon, and 'Brug-smyon — date from approximately the sixteenth century, their poetry and stories are still being told today. Other figures, from both earlier and later times, are also referred to as being mad, including the poet-yogin Mi-la-ras-pa and Thang-stong-rgyal-po, the "patron saint" of Tibetan opera.

The behavior of the saintly madman is similar to that of the mad individuals (*smyon-pa*) we have already described. What distinguishes the former from the latter from the pathological point of view is that the

saintly madman seems to be in full possession of his mental faculties. In fact, the popular conception holds him to be a holy man — a saint — far superior in intellect, meditative skill, and learning to his monastic or otherwise orthodox peers — in short, a Buddha.

The principal attributes of the saintly madman are:

- a. A generalized rejection of customary behavior which society-atlarge, and the monastic establishment in particular, regard as appropriate for the religious man. Although several of the mad saints did take monastic vows early in their careers, they seldom lived the life of the typical monastery-bound monk. Instead they lived the life of the wandering yogi or arhant, wearing rags, and, in general, they tended to blend their activities with those of worldly men. This is so, because life in a large monastery is highly complex, requiring considerable obligations and participation in communal chores. Even though the saintly madmen might justify their contrary behavior by saying that the ordinary Vinaya rules did not apply to them, their activities could still prove detrimental to the establishment as a whole, by encouraging the other ordinary monks to take their religious vows less seriously. As this could jeopardize their chances for salvation, the saintly madman would be hurting his stated purpose of working for the salvation of all sentient beings. Such an event occurred in the youth of Gtsang-smyon Heruka, for example, and led to his leaving the monastery for a life of pilgrimage and meditation. In the process of acting out the content of a religious vision, he offended the high monks and lay patrons of his monastery and was forced to leave (Chandra 1969: f.14b).
- b. An inclination toward bizarre modes of dress. 'Brug-pa Kun-legs ('Brug-smyon) was often questioned by ordinary monks about his clothing. The second volume of his biography contains a hilariously exaggerated description of his own dress, as well as that of Gtsang-smyon and Dbus-smyon ('Brug-smyon n.d.:ff. 2b, 3b). The method in this madness is revealed in the biography of Thang-stong-rgyal-po, also known as Lung-stong-smyon-pa, who was found one day sitting on a circum-ambulation path covered by a seedy old blanket. When some monks made some disparaging remarks about this, he proceeded to tell them about the symbolic esoteric meaning of each seam and patch, a mandala constructed not in the usual highly ritualized manner, but with the mundane elements of a common thing ('Gyur-med-bde-chen n.d.: f.101).
- c. A disregard for the niceties of interpersonal behavior, particularly with regard to social status, modes of address, deferential behavior, and so forth. Often this would appear as rather childish mockery, but it had great appeal for the common man for whom it was intended. 'Brug-pa Kun-legs was particularly invidious in his comments on high teachers and monks. Once he was staying at an inn when a famous prophet (gter-ston)

rode up on horseback. Disgusted by the spectacle everyone was making over him, 'Brug-pa Kun-legs sang a bawdy and sarcastic song, which concluded with the phrases

Whenever tasty beer is served, even the highest of ordained monks will drink it in secret.

When the serving girl approaches, even the highest lama will glance intently beneath her dress ('Brug-smyon n.d.:f. 60a).

To the protest that people would accuse him of being mad, 'Brug-pa Kun-legs replied that he cared not for what others would think, that they always found fault with other people without being able to see their own aberrations ('Brug-smyon n.d.:f. 57b).

d. A professed disdain for scholasticism, the study of religion through books alone. The saintly madman preached that the best instruction was not to be gained from studying books, or even from one's guru, but rather from one's self, or any other phenomenal appearance. 'Brug-pa Kun-legs wrote, "Who or whatever appears becomes my fundamental teacher" ('Brug-smyon n.d.:f. 6a). In a similar vein, Mi-la-ras-pa once said:

Once one understands all appearances as one's book, Time passes and one forgets black-lettered books. In fact, it is proper to forget their burdensome teachings (Gtsang-smyon n.d.:f. 265).

e. The use of popular poetical forms, mime, songs, epic tales, and so forth, during the course of their preaching. There is little doubt that this characteristic of the mad saint sprang from the desire to involve the ordinary man in salvation activity, causing him to awaken to the Buddha's message. Thang-stong-rgyal-po's invention of the Tibetan opera (a-lce lha-mo), brilliant spectacles and pageants which remain the most popular art form in Tibet, was probably based on this notion.

f. The use of obscenity and vulgar parlance. Partially meant to further demonstrate their public disrespect for conventional morality, the use of profanity was no doubt calculated to jolt the self-righteous hypocrisy of the religious establishment. The key words in the saintly madman's teachings were "naturalness" (rang-byung) and "spontaneity" (shugs-byung). It is in this connection that Mi-la-ras-pa's expressed lack of shame over his nakedness must be understood.

Well, my fine young fellow, You find shame where there is no shame. This penis of mine is a natural thing, I know nothing of such artificial shame (Gtsang-smyon n.d.:f. 83a).

Obscenity was also meant to convey Tantric messages as well. According to an oral version of a 'Brug-pa Kun-legs story, one day 'Brug-smyon arrives at the house of a well-off farmer, and requests board and room for

the night. The farmer consents and goes off about his business, only to return to find the mad saint and the farmer's wife in a compromising position. Reaching for his sword, he attacks 'Brug-pa Kun-legs, who takes hold of the sword and ties the blade into a knot. The farmer then recognizes him as a holy man, and invites him to stay there as long as he likes, saying he intends to build a chapel dedicated to Tārā, where he can reside. 'Brug-pa Kun-legs consents to this plan and tells him, "You like religion and I like cunt. May both of us be happy!" According to monk informants, the bawdry refers to Tantric practice of ("sexual") union in meditation with one's tutelary's female coadept (mkha'-'gro-ma), and that "happiness" in this context signifies the bliss of enlightenment. We should also note incidentally that it is in the figure of the mkha'-'gro-ma that we find the homologous counterpart of the witch. These supernaturals often appear as creatures of hideous demeanor and appearance. Not a few hagiographical recountings of the lives of the saints (rnam-thar) describe encounters with these figures, who at first threaten to kill or dismember the adept, and then eventually reveal themselves as his divine assistants; death and dismemberment are, of course, moments of supreme achievement in both certain shamanistic and Tantric practices.

It should be obvious that the saintly madman shares a number of behavioral characteristics that we have described for the categories beginning with rlung-smyo. He is sociopathic, extroverted, aggressive, argumentative, and engages in debate, singing, dancing, and so on. Although this range of "mad" activity characterizes the reverse of normative social behavior, in the case of the truly mad it is pathological and involuntary; whereas for the mad saint, it constitutes a strategy which is actively embraced and goal-directed. This cultural idea is further reinforced by the popular notion that madness is sometimes indicative of saintliness. Goldstein (1964) found, for instance, that ldab-ldob, the so-called soldier monks who engage in internecine monastic fighting, homosexual acts etc., actually mature into exemplary monks in many cases. In a different vein, Miller (this volume) recorded responses to TAT pictures shown to Tibetan refugees in India. One sketch, depicting an "encounter between a monk and a hippie ... produced unexpected responses." The hippie, despite his disheveled and beggarly appearance, was treated in a manner not inconsistent with how a madman might be viewed. A typical response was that one should not judge a book by its cover, or that the hippie might have a good heart (mind) despite his appearance.

The aim of the mad saint is consistent with the ideals of Mahāyāna, i.e., to work for the salvation of all sentient beings. His methodology, however, is radical. He takes literally the description given in the *Hevajra Tantra*:

Just as a man who suffers with flatulence is given beans to eat, so that wind may overcome wind in the way of a homeopathic cure, so existence is purified by existence in the countering of discursive thought by its own kind.... Just as those who have been burned by fire must suffer again by fire, so those who have been burned by the fire of passion must suffer the fire of passion. Those things by which men of evil conduct are bound, others turn into means and gain thereby release from the bonds of existence. By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released, but by the heretical buddhists this practice of reversals is not known (Snellgrove 1959:vol. 1: 93).

The reversal of normative behavior explains the paradox of the madman's actions; egocentrism fights egocentrism, his vulgarity fights the vulgarity of the world. The revolutionary aspect of the madman ideal places him in opposition to a number of things. The comfortable and easy pace of traditional scholasticism and monastic life he views as an impediment to salvation and freedom. Likewise, for him the norms that govern relationships between ego and alter, high and low, are like fetters that bind "naturalness" and "spontaneity," a style of action which is not unlike that of the truly insane, who are, by that fact, exempt from punishment for their infringements of Tibetan secular law. His madness, in the popular mind, is the proof of his success, and his misconduct is beyond judgment; he serves the masses as living proof of the Mahāyāna thesis that the liberated man is outside the laws of karma. Having already achieved enlightenment, he is just an appearance, an embodied illusion like everything else in this world. What he does is only relative to what is really real.

In the Tantric worldview, human behavior, both psychological and physiological, has a naturally declining or downward impetus. *Viparītabhāvanā* (Tib. *bzlog-pa'i sgom-pa*, literally "meditation which reverses"), on the other hand, has a "regressive" or inherently "reverse" nature, writes Dasgupta,

... firstly in the sense that it involves yogic processes which give a regressive or upward motion to the whole biological as well as psychological systems which in their ordinary nature possess a downward tendency, and secondly, in the sense that such yogic practices lead the Siddha to his original, ultimate nature as the immortal *Being* in his perfect or divine body, back from the ordinary process of becoming (Dasgupta 1969:229–230).

To this statement it could be added that the practitioner makes use of those forms of behavior which are polluting or otherwise ritually proscribed, because they have the appearance or form (but not the reality) of being polluting. By behaving in a manner contrary to social norms, the saintly madman attempts to reach a perfect understanding of the Mādhyamika thesis that there is no distinction between good and bad, that everything has a "uniformity of flavor" (ro-snyoms).

In the passage from the authoritative Hevajra Tantra which we quoted

above, what Snellgrove has translated as "homeopathic cure" is rendered by the Tibetan translator as "the application of the medicine of reversal" (bzlog-pa'i sman ni brtags-pa). A medicine reverses the normal course of an illness while it enhances the normal course of life. So also does reverse behavior halt the downward trend of human existence, even as it provides upward impetus towards the state of final salvation. Similarly, the conventional rules of social behavior, which funtion to insure the smooth operation of the moral order, are also a moral illness. What the mad saint demonstrates is that these conventional rules not only bind us to the world, they also perpetuate our spiritual problems. He demonstrates this by using his naturalness and spontaneity to slash away at the rules of interaction and the hypocrisies which they engender - excessive, insincere deference, politeness, and humility. The following example neatly demonstrates what we have in mind. Once on the occasion of a New Year's ceremony, 'Brug-pa Kun-legs came to the hall of the Second Dalai Lama, Dge-'dun-rgya-mtsho. An aged and revered aide to His Holiness asked 'Brug-pa Kun-legs to sing a song for the occasion to the collected assembly of monks. This audacious song in some ways parallels the opening lines of certain Mahāyāna sutras, where the Buddha makes a statement that proves offensive to some group, whereupon they get up and leave. A second statement offends certain others, and they leave also. In this way the vast majority of the listeners depart, leaving only those individuals truly desirous of hearing the truth. In this way the song of 'Brug-pa Kun-legs consists of a series of verses, each condemning a certain type of individual or behavior, and each ending with the injunction that this or that type of individual should "get on out of here." Of course no one leaves, though the song becomes progressively more vulgar. In one verse, 'Brug-pa Kun-legs condemns nuns as whores and murderers of their own illegitimate children, telling them to "get on out of here." In another he condemns wretched horses that are always falling into holes and throwing their riders, embarrassing them in public. It is left to the imagination of the audience just to whom he is referring. In the course of the song virtually everything and everyone is condemned for some form of evil deed or hypocrisy. At the end even His Holiness snickers a little, and the audience politely tells 'Brug-pa Kun-legs how true and correct his words are. At this climactic point 'Brug-pa Kun-legs, the madman and religious radical, says, "But this song does not at all comprehend the real truth, and I myself am an old bag of lies!" We are tempted to see in this episode what Søren Kierkegaard once defined as the underlying principle of his life as a writer, "to beguile a person into the truth." It is precisely this "Kierkegaardian reversal," as Joseph Pieper (1964:39) has called it, that 'Brug-pa Kun-legs employs. Pleased by the good humor and truth of the song, the audience is suddenly informed that it is all wrong, that the author is a liar. The real message of 'Brug-pa Kun-legs is that from the point of view of the absolute truth, none of what he says is true. And that, from the relative point of view, makes him a liar. He has beguiled them to view reality from a point of view which they had become accustomed to ignore in practice.

The saintly madman is a key figure in Tibetan Buddhism, and a primary example of how the synthesis of two historically and philosophically distinct traditions has come about. On one hand, his madness fits perfectly the model introduced by the Indic tradition. Figures such as the eightyfour Siddhas were madmen also, a fact which earned Tantric practitioners a bad reputation among the orthodox religious circles of India. Saintly madness was not confined to Buddhist circles alone, for there are also Hindu traditions which note that the perfected sanyassin should behave like an idiot. (Although it would take us too far afield in the present context to demonstrate it, we would also maintain that all the world religions have had their "mad" saints.) On the other hand, the form of madness adopted by the Tibetan mad saint may be viewed equally and legitimately as historically unconnected with the Indic tradition. We have attempted to show that this pattern of madness was indigenous to Tibet. In fact the symptoms we describe for smyo-ba are generalized throughout Inner and Northern Asia, the Pacific Rim and North America. The Tibetan mad saint has somehow synthesized these diverse historical traditions, but in a manner in which this synthesis of cultures merges with the most abstract, yet basic, ideas of Tibetan philosophy and worldview.

In doing so he also shows us that the duality which binds us is a product of out own unrealized nature; and that the dichotomy depicted in Buddhist theory — conventionally understood as noumenal truth/relative truth, and in the popular tradition as the life-affirming attachments to the world/the life-denying withdrawal from the world — is a false opposition. By identifying phenomenal appearance with noumenal goal, behavior with mentition and intention, and the postulated laws of moral causation with intuitive method, he thus overcomes a counterproductive polarity which would otherwise work against his purposeful pursuit of salvation for all beings.

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