



KAMMA AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH (*CUTI*) AND REBIRTH (*PATISANDHI*) AS EXPOUNDED IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Due to birth, old age and death will be the outcome. Everyone who gets to be born will without fail meet with death. Beginning in our mother's womb we make our way through life. One existence after another, each life is only a temporary process due to different kammās. Kamma means intentional bodily, verbal, or mental actions done by beings who are not fully liberated. In the ultimate sense, kamma means volition. If the volition is good, kamma is good; and if the volition is bad, kamma is bad.

*Death (*cuti*) is the extinction of mental life (*jīvitindriya*), physical life (*jīvitarūpa*), consciousness (*viññāna*) and heat (*usmatejo*) in one existence. *Patisandhi* (rebirth) is so called because of linking previous and subsequent life; or linking with the bringing of the next existence. Immediately following the dissolution of death consciousness, normally there arises in a new existence the rebirth-linking consciousness. This rebirth consciousness is a resultant consciousness (*vipāka-citta*) produced usually by kamma that ripened at the stage of sign in the previous life. Kamma will take us to a destination that befits our actions and deeds carried out in this life: as shown in the age-old adage of "You reap what you sow".*

KEYWORDS— *Kamma, Rebirth (Patisandhi), Death (Cuti) and Philosophy.*

INTRODUCTION

Everyone who gets to be born will without fail meet with death. The Buddha said, "*Jātipaccayājarāmarana.*" Due to birth, old age and death will be the outcome. Travellers have their destinations whether they drive, fly, take a train or boat. Wherever they are heading, there has to be a journey's end. In the same way, beginning in our mother's womb we make our way through life. Like everyone else we will have to disembark at the end of life's journey at some point or another. One existence after another, each life is only a temporary process due to different *kammās*. *Kamma* and rebirth are intimately related. *Kamma* is the fuel for rebirth. By the destruction of *Kamma* (*kammakkhaya*) the process of rebirth ends. Beings can get reborn anywhere in the universe. *Kamma* means intentional bodily, verbal, or mental actions performed by beings who are not fully liberated. The actions can be good or bad; and these actions, if conditions are favorable, produce pleasant and unpleasant result respectively. *Kamma* is a law of nature and is not controlled by any being. There is no involvement of 'self', 'soul', "God", or 'Creator' in this phenomenon. Each one is the architect of his own fate and destiny. The past actions influence the present, and the past and the present actions influence the future. *Kamma* and its workings is behind different kinds of existence, difference in appearance, characteristic, intelligence, aptitude, wealth, health, etc., among beings. The personal, social, and psychological differences are due to *kamma*. Rebirth is the most significant result produced by *kamma*, the phenomena during dying

process that determine new rebirth are workings of *kamma*, and death itself is a part of result of *kamma*. According to the time of ripening, *kamma* can be divided into two types: at the moment of rebirth-linking (*patisandhivipāka*) and lifetime (*pavattivipāka*). *Patisandhi* is the initial result produced by *kamma* in a particular life. It is a result that arises linking two lives. *Pavatti* means time between rebirth-linking consciousness (*patisandhicitta*) and death (*cuti-citta*). During this period, beings experience the result of *kamma* as well as perform new *kamma*. Among the results that ripen during lifetime, the near death sign produced by *kamma* often called stage of sign is very significant. It determines the existence where a dying person is heading for. Therefore, sometimes it is called sign of existence (*bhavanimitta*). The last moment of a life is called death moment. The consciousness which performs this function is also the result of *kamma*. All *kamma* bear the nature of producing result. However, as the ripening of *kamma* depends upon supporting conditions, in the absence of supporting conditions, *kamma* does not give result. Through the development of Eightfold Noble Path, all defilements get eradicated; and one becomes an Arahant. In the absence of defilements, Arahant's 'actions' are not '*kamma*'. After the passing away into *Nibbāna*, all *kamma* become defunct, and one is free from *kamma*.

Three Kinds of Objects at Death

When one is about to die, one goes through the stage of sign during which one of the three objects comes into manifestation by the power of productive *kamma* (*janakakamma*). The three kinds of objects that appear at the time of death are: 1. *Kamma*; 2. *Kamma-nimitta* (sign of *kamma*); 3. *Gati-nimitta* (Sign of destination).

(1) *Kamma*: It is a productive wholesome or unwholesome volition that itself represents to the person about to die. The dying person experiences the same type of mind as he had experienced while he was doing the action. He feels as if he were doing that *kamma* anew. For example, a person who has given much alms may think in his last hours that he is giving charity and experience the same type of feeling associated with offering. If the unwholesome action of killing ripens, for instance, the dying person may feel as if he were killing animal, and his mind may get occupied by hatred. For example, a fisherman on his deathbed may talk as if he were catching fish.

(2) *Kamma-nimitta* (sign of *kamma*): It is an object or image associated with the good or evil deed. It may be a form, sound, smell, knife, gun, etc. that had been apprehended or was instrumental in performing *kamma*. If this sign appears, the dying person feels as if he were in the possession of the offering, gifts, weapons, and so on. For example, the image of a shrine may appear to a person who had offered a shrine. Those who had built pagodas and monasteries may see visions of the pagodas and monasteries or the offerings they had donated in association with that meritorious deed such as robes, alms-bowl, and flowers. A mediator may see mediation centre, beads. A devout person may see the image of a monk, the Buddha image, monastery, or hear chanting of the *Pāli* texts. Those who have attained *jhāna* may see counter image (*patibhāganimitta*) of his meditation object. Likewise, a physician may see the image of patients. One who has done abortion may see fetus. A butcher may see a great heap of cattle bones, hear the groans of slaughtered cattle, or see the image of a butcher knife.

(3) *Gati-nimitta* (sign of destination): It is a symbol of the realm into which the dying person is about to be reborn — the vision of one's destination. In other words, that is the thing that will be obtained and experienced in next life. For example, if one is going to be reborn in the human world, the mother's womb may appear to him in the form of a red woolen slipper, house, and so on. A person heading for a heavenly rebirth may see celestial chariots, celestial beings, celestial mansions or couches. A person heading for an animal realm may see forests or field. A person heading for hell may see hell dogs hell fires, metal cauldron, king of hell, or hell wardens. A person heading for a ghostly realm (*peta*) may see ghost coming to take him or her away, may see big forests, mountains, water in the rivers and the coast of the ocean where they dwell's in some cases, the sign of destiny that appears as sound or smell can be heard or smelt by those nearby. These signs of destiny appear in accordance with the destiny which *kamma* determines.

The *kamma* that produces these signs can be one that was performed earlier during the same lifetime or a previous life. It is said that even a *kamma* performed a hundred thousand millions of aeons ago in the past can come and make its appearance.

The mental states usually manifest in the facial expressions. Hence, by seeing the facial expression of a dying person, it is possible to presume what type of *kamma* might be working at the stage of sign and where that person is possibly heading for. The facial expression of a person heading for blissful plane may become clear and cheerful; and those who are heading for woeful plane may look afraid, gloomy, and sorrowful. The near death signs are produced entirely by *kamma* and it envelops the mind of the dying person.

In connection with this, the Buddha has said: "When a wise man is in his death bed, then the good actions that he did in the past cover him, overspread him, and envelop him. He then knows that he shall go to the destination of those who have not done what is evil and have done what is good."

"When a foolish man is in his death bed, then his bad actions cover him, overspread him, and envelop him. He then knows that he shall go to the destination of those who have not done what is good and have done what is evil."

The near death signs are produced by productive *kamma* and one cannot willfully implant them. These signs are not like the images or pictures that we see when we recall something. As these signs are set up solely by the *kamma*, we cannot recall something and make them the sign. If one wants to see blissful signs, one should do a lot of meritorious deeds during life and avoid unwholesome actions; and dwell in wholesome states of mind during dying moments.

Kamma at the Moment of Death (*cuti*)

Death is formally defined as the cutting off of the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), heat (*tejo dhātu*) and consciousness (*viññāna*) of one individual included within the limits of a single existence. Death is merely the temporarily end of a temporary phenomenon, and not the complete annihilation of a being. Although the material life has ceased, if the forces that can actuate new lives still exist, a new life starts somewhere else. Just as only by the destruction of an electric bulb, electrical energy cannot be destroyed, even so although body breaks down, if conditions remain, the invisible *kammic* energies that can produce life do not get annihilated at death. Or just as setting of the sun at one place means rising at other place, death in one life means rebirth in another.

The synonyms of death usually used in *Pāli* texts are: 'The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings,' 'their passing away,' 'dissolution,' 'disappearance,' 'dying,' 'completion of time,' 'dissolution of aggregates,' 'laying down of the body'.

After the arising of decisive sign, the person is on the verge of death. Thereafter, attending to the object thus presented, the stream of consciousness continually flows bending towards the state into which one is to be reborn. Immediately after the last thought process, the death consciousness (*cuti-citta*) arises and passes away. The life continuum that arises before death may arise for a shorter or longer time, even up to days or weeks before death consciousness appear.

Causes of Death: There are so many ways death can arise: warfare, epidemics, and mortal diseases kill so many people; and there are accidents, suicides, murders, executions, and so on that takes so many lives each day.

From the Buddhist perspective, all types of death can be classified into four:

- (1) **Through the expiration of the age-limit or life-span (*āyukkhayamarana*):** This is the kind of death comes about in those realms of existence where the life-span is bounded by a definite limit.
- (2) **Through the expiration of the productive *kammic* force (*kammakkhayamarana*):** This is the kind of death that takes place when the potential energy of the productive *kamma* (*janaka*) gets exhausted.
- (3) **Through the expiration of both (*ubhayakkhayamarana*):** When both the lifespan and *kammic* force simultaneously come to an end, this is death by the expiration of both.
- (4) **Through the intervention of a destructive *kamma* (*upacchedaka-marana*):** This is a term for the death that occurs when a powerful destructive *kamma* cuts off the force of the *kamma* that generated rebirth even before the expiration of that *kamma* or the lifespan. This type of death is untimely death (*akālamarana*) whereas the former ones are timely death (*kālamarana*).

To elaborate, certain realms of existence have definite life spans. For example, the life span of deities in the realm of *cātumahārājika* is 9,000,000 human years. When the life of deities in that particular plane of existence reaches the age limit, they pass away. Nevertheless, those who have strong good *kamma* can at times

live more than the age limit. It is said that Venerable Mahākassapa, Venerable □nanda, and Visākaha lived up to the age of 120; and Venerable Bakula Mahāthera lived up to 160. If the *kamma* that produced rebirth has not yet exhausted its potential when death takes place through the expiration of lifespan, the *kammic* force can generate another rebirth that is appropriate to its ethical quality. Hence, a deity may become deity again and a human being can become a human being again.

When the *kamma* sustaining life expends its force, death takes place even though the normal life-span may remain. In this case, the life faculty ceases even before the end of the lifespan. A powerful destructive *kamma* can also cause death by prematurely cutting off the force of the life-sustaining *kamma* even though the normal lifespan or potential of *kamma* that generated rebirth may not have expired. Sudden deaths such as the one encountered in accidents or suicide or after performing a very heavy unwholesome *kamma* come under this category. Just as a more powerful opposing force can check the path of a flying arrow and bring it down to the ground, even so a very powerful *kammic* force is capable of nullifying the potential energy of the *kamma* that had produced that particular life, and may even destroy the life (*jīvitindriya*) of that being.

The fourfold advent of death may be compared to the four ways of extinguishing a lighted oil-lamp: (1) an oil lamp may go out due to the exhaustion of the wick; (2) due to the exhaustion of the oil; (3) due to the simultaneous exhaustion of both, or (4) some extraneous causes, like a gust of wind. In this simile, wick is like lifespan and oil is like *kamma*.

The passing away of death consciousness marks the end of a particular life. With the cutting off of death consciousness, the life-faculty and all the *kamma* born materiality too is cut off, and there remains only a corpse, dead materiality. There is no being who is free from death. All those who are born have to experience the phenomena of death. And immediately after death, unless one is an *Arahant*, a new life starts in a new plane of existence.

Kamma at the Moment of Rebirth (Patisandhi)

Immediately following the dissolution of death consciousness, normally there arises in a new existence the rebirth-linking consciousness (*patisandhicitta*). This rebirth consciousness is a resultant consciousness (*vipākacitta*) produced usually by *kamma* that ripened at the stage of sign in the previous life. According to *Sammohavinodanī*, *Patisandhi* is so called because of linking previous and subsequent life; or linking with the bringing of the next existence. The rebirth-linking consciousness usually takes the same object apprehended by the consciousness in the stage of sign or final cognitive process (*maranāsannajavana*) of the previous life. If that *javana* had observed the sign of *kamma*, the rebirth consciousness of the subsequent life observes that very sign of *kamma*. And the rebirth consciousness, the life-continuum as well as the death consciousness in the subsequent life observe that same object.

In the case of a being who pass away from non-percipient realm (*asaññasatta*) where there is no mental is no mental process, the object of rebirth-linking comes into manifestation through the power of *kamma* done before being born in *asaññasatta* plane, which has chance to produce its result. The object taken by rebirth consciousness in a new life is not of the immediate past life but produce by the power of *kamma* that generated the rebirth consciousness. In the case of one born as a non-percipient being, where only corporeality arises sustaining the continuity, the rebirth-linking consciousness does not arise at all. Only the materiality arises by the power of the *kamma* that propelled that being into that existence.

Four Modes of Birth: In Buddhism, the age of a person is not counted from the day of conventional birth — end of gestation period and coming to the world.

According to Buddhism, there are four modes of birth which embrace all living beings in *samsara* (round of birth and death):

(1) Egg-born beings (Andaja): Being born by breaking out of the shell of egg such as fish, birds, oviparous snakes. This is called egg-born generation.

(2) Womb-born beings (Jalābuja): Beings born by breaking out from the caul or who lie in the mother's womb; such as human beings, some deities inhabiting the earth, some animals that take conception in mother's womb. This is called womb-born generation.

(3) Moisture-born beings (Samsedaja): Beings who are born through moisture; such as beings born in rotten fish, in rotten corpse, in rotten dough, in cesspit, or in sewer. This is called moisture-born generation.

(4) Beings having spontaneous birth (Opapātika): Beings having a spontaneous birth are generally invisible to physical eye. Conditioned by past *kamma* they appear spontaneously, without passing through embryonic stage. *Petas*, *devas*, *brāhmas*, beings in hell, human beings at the beginning of the world and some fallen *asuras* (*vinipātikā*), etc., belong to this spontaneous generation. A note here is that when these beings pass away they do so in the fashion of their birth. They just disappear from their plane of existence like the blowing off of a flame and appear somewhere else.

Conditions for Birth: According to Buddhism, everything in the world arises due to many causes and conditions working together. For example, for the arising of a plant, apart from seed, other supportive conditions required for its actual arising and its development should also be present. A mango tree, apart from the mango seed, requires for its germination, growth, and development other conditions such as earth, water, light, heat, etc. Similarly, the *kamma* can be compared to the seed and other supportive conditions such as defilements, to water, light, moisture.

In connection with the human rebirth, in the *Mahātanhāsankhaya Sutta* the Buddha said that “Monks, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place through the conjunction of these three conditions... Only when these conditions are favorable, then the conception of the embryo can take place in the mother’s womb.”

These conditions are:

1. The union or conjunction of father and mother (*mātāpiarocasannipatitāhonti*).
2. The mother has not reached menopause (*mātācautunīhoti*).
3. The being to be born gets established (*gandhabbocapaccupatthitohoti*).

According to Dependent Origination, the cause of rebirth-linking consciousness is defilement, ignorance and craving being the most significant ones, and *kamma*. When these two conditions are present, the ‘sign of existence’ arises and life shifts to another existence immediately after death. It impels that when there is no ignorance and craving, the sign of existence does not arise and there is no rebirth-linking consciousness after death. In support of this, it is said in the commentary thus: “Because craving and ignorance have not been abandoned... the process is pushed forward by craving and flung forward by formations...”

When the conditionally arisen psychophysical phenomenon arises after death, it is said that one has entered into new existence. However, there is no transmigration of ‘soul’ (*atta*), ‘being’ (*satta*), or ‘life-principle’ (*jīva*), from the previous existence into new existence, and yet this ‘life’ could not have come into existence without a previous cause.

This fact may be compared with the reflection of one’s face in the mirror. Just as the image in the mirror is produced by one’s face without any passing over of face, even so is the arising of rebirth-linking consciousness conditioned by past causes. It can also be compared to echo that is produced because of one’s voice. This process is like that undergone by fresh milk. The milk turns to curds, then to butter, and to ghee after a time. It would be wrong to say that the milk was the same as the curds, the butter, or the ghee; yet they are produced out of it.

In the story of *Kālayakkhinī*, the two enemies were always born together as rivals in many lives because of their aspiration to take revenge. They coupled their aspiration with strong hatred and animosity and accordingly they were harming each other in lower form rebirths.

In the *Aggañña Sutta* the Buddha said that if one does both types of bodily actions, both types of verbal actions, both types of mental actions, holds mixed types of views, performs actions with mixed views; because of mixed types of view and *kamma*, after death he experiences happiness and pain.

The commentary explains that the ‘doer of both’ (*dvayakārī*) means doer of both type of *kamma*: at times he does wholesome actions and at times he does unwholesome actions. In a single moment, it is not possible to give two types of results. For instance, a person has little wholesome actions and many unwholesome. He/she is born in the clan of warrior (*khattiya*) or priests (*brāhmana*) through wholesome action. The unwholesome *kamma* makes him blind, cripple and so on. He becomes unworthy of becoming a king and is unable to enjoy the wealth. To another at death time both the wholesome and unwholesome *kammas* appear. Among them, for instance, unwholesome is stronger. It throws away the wholesome actions

and gives rise to animal life. The wholesome *kamma* is then experienced during the lifetime. That will make him auspicious elephant or auspicious bull etc. He experiences happiness due to that.

Immediately followed by the cessation of the death consciousness (*cuti-citta*), there arises rebirth-linking consciousness at the first moment of a new birth. The rebirth-linking links two lives, new life and the former life. It arises as a condition and forerunner of mind and corporeality that are reborn together. And it is generated by *sankhāra* (*kamma*) with the help of ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*tanhā*).

Destination Directed by *Kamma*: There are five kinds of destination (*gati*) where rebirth-linking consciousness can arise. The Buddha said that “Sāriputta, there are these five destinations. What are the five? Hell (*nirayagati*), the animal realm (*tiracchānagati*), the realm of ghosts (*petagati*), human beings (*manussagati*), and gods (*devagati*).”

After death, in accordance with the *kamma* that manifested at the stage of sign, a new life starts in one of the five destinations. These five types of destination can be expanded into 31 planes of existence. It can be further classified into three kinds: (1) Sensuous plane, (2) Fine-material plane, and (3) Immaterial plane. The 31 planes of existence are 11 sensuous planes, 16 fine-material planes, and four immaterial planes. Sensuous plane can be further divided into two: seven blissful (*sugati*), i.e., human world, and six celestial; and four woeful (*duggati* or *apāya*), i.e., animal world, ghost world, demon world, and hell. ‘*Duggati*’ means ‘woeful course of existence’, and ‘*Sugati*’ means ‘happy course of existence’. The six celestial planes, fine-material, and immaterial planes come under destination of gods. The plane of demons is included in the destination of *peta*.

The 6 deity worlds are: (1) *Cātummahārājika* (the realm of four great kings): the lowest of the heavenly realms where the Guardian Deities of the four quarters of the firmament reside with their followers. The king of hell and the guards of hell also belong to this realm; (2) *Tāvātimsa* (the realm of the thirty-three *devas*): *Sakka deva* is the king of this realm; (3) *Yāma* (the realm of the *yāma devas*); (4) *Tusita* (the realm of delight); (5) *Nimmānarati* (the realm of the *devas* who delight in creation); (6) *Paranimmīta-vasavattī* (the realm of the *devas* who make others’ creation serve their own ends).

There are altogether 16 fine-material planes of existence. There are three 1st *jhāna* planes: the *brahma*’s retinue, the *brahma*’s ministers, and great *brahma*. There are three 2nd *jhāna* planes: minor lustre, infinite lustre, and radiant lustre. There are three 3rd *jhāna* planes: minor aura, infinite aura, and steady sure. There are seven 4th *jhāna* planes: great reward, non-percipient (*asaññasatta*) and five pure abodes (*suddhāvāsa*).

There are four types of *arūpāvacara* plans: (1) *Ākāśanañcāyatana* (the sphere of infinite space), (2) *viññāncāyatana* (the sphere of infinite consciousness), (3) *ākāśaññāyatana* (the sphere of nothingness), and (4) *mevasaññāññāyatana* (the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception).

Beings are born in these 31 planes by 20 types of rebirth-linking process and 19 types of rebirth-linking consciousness. Although they vary in the life span, these planes of existence are not permanent abodes. Accordingly, the rebirth in those planes is also not eternal.

Each realm is keyed to a particular type of rebirth consciousness (*patisandhi*), which becomes the life-continuum (*bhavanga*), flowing on through the course of existence (*pavatti*), until the termination of the life process at death (*cuti*). Among the 19 resultant Consciousness that can function as rebirth-linking, two investigating consciousness with neutral feeling and 8 great resultants consciousness arise as rebirth-linking in the sensuous plans. The unwholesome-resultant investigating consciousness with neutral feeling produced by the volition of 11 unwholesome Consciousness performs the function of rebirth-linking in the four woeful states. The rootless wholesome-resultant investigating consciousness accompanied by equanimity resulted from wholesome *kamma* of inferior grade accompanied by two roots does so in the case of human with deformity and among lower classes of gods. The eight sense-sphere resultants with 2 roots or three roots generated by wholesome *kamma* of inferior grade with 3 roots, of superior grade with 2 roots, or of supreme grade with 3 roots respectively, arise at the conception of gods, and human free from congenital defects.

The five fine material resultant consciousness produced by fine material *jhāna* consciousness serve as rebirth-linking in the fine-material planes. In the non-percipient plane, only the material group of nine-corporeality led by *jīvita* (*jīvitānavaka*) arises. Therefore, it is called material rebirth state (*rūpapatisandhi*).

The four immaterial resultant consciousness produced by the four immaterial *Jhāna* consciousness serve as rebirth-linking in the immaterial planes.

When one passes away from the plane of non-percipient beings, one can be reborn in the sensuous blissful plane. As the beings in this plane do not have mind, they have no opportunity to attain *jhāna*, and thereby they cannot be reborn in either fine-material or immaterial plane. Passing away from other fine material plane, one may be reborn either in fine material plane itself or the immaterial planes — according to the *jhāna* he possesses. Thus, Brahmas of the fine-material planes have the privilege to be reborn in twenty-six planes with the exception of woeful abode (*apāya*) and non-percipient realm (*asaññasatta*).

Those who are reborn in immaterial planes can develop immaterial *jhāna* that corresponds to their level of rebirth or the higher *jhānas*, but not those that are lower. When they pass away from immaterial plane, they are reborn in the sensuous blissful plane. As they are free from hatred and lust throughout their life as *brahma*, it is not possible for them to fall down to sensuous woeful planes where beings are reborn due to strong greed and hatred.

CONCLUSION

While teachings on *kamma* and rebirth are an important part of Buddhist belief, they are not the most crucial, nor the most specifically Buddhist. They act, though, as the lead-up to, and motivator for the most important teachings, those on the Four Noble Truths. When teaching laypersons, the Buddha frequently began with a ‘step-by-step discourse’: (i) on giving and moral observance as leading to a heavenly rebirth, and then, (ii) on the advantages of renouncing sense-pleasures (by meditative calming of the mind).

In *samsāra*, all beings except *Arahants* are reborn in a new life immediately after death. And those who are born are not free from experiencing the results of *kamma* they have accumulated in the past. In that life, they again perform various *kamma*. In this way the cycle of *kamma* and result goes on and on. It is *kamma* that conditions rebirth. Past *kamma* conditions the present birth; and present *kamma*, in combination with past *kamma*, conditions the future. The present is the offspring of the past, and becomes, in turn, the parent of the future. Nevertheless, it is not entirely impossible to escape this vicious circle. There is a type of *kamma* explained in Buddhism that breaks this circle.

All *kamma* bear the nature of producing result. However, as the ripening of *kamma* depends upon supporting conditions, in the absence of supporting conditions, *kamma* does not give result. Through the development of Eightfold Noble Path, all defilements get eradicated; and one becomes an *Arahant*. Consequently, in the absence of defilements, *Arahant*’s ‘actions’ are not ‘*kamma*’. After the passing away into *Nibbāna*, all *kamma* become defunct, and one is one is free from *kamma*.

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