Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:04:57

We've been talking a lot about the importance of continuity. Sayadaw U Tejaniya, at one point when yogis were—I don't know what the right word is—a little confused perhaps about not having a lot of instruction in the practice, kept coming to him asking, "What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do in this practice?" So he came up with the idea of three key yogi jobs that we do in this practice. We've been talking about them all, not so much in this framework, but we've mentioned them all. He said the three yogi jobs are to cultivate right view, to be aware, and to keep being aware—basically to do that continuously.

And yet, I think the way we normally go about continuity is a kind of more forceful or effortful way, and that's not so helpful necessarily. We can use effort to support and cultivate mindfulness, but it often is bound up with some striving, some holding, some pushing, some trying, some more doing.

So what I thought to explore this evening is some things that support continuity. What is it that creates conditions that support continuity of practice? As Carol said, the idea of continuity often creates this idea of "I've got to do this all day long," and we do—we are encouraged to practice all day long—but not with a kind of forceful mind. So we can also think about what will support this. We could also say momentum—the momentum of mindfulness or the establishment of mindfulness. Those are other words that evoke this continuity, the mindfulness that is happening moment after moment, that momentum of mindfulness, that establishment of mindfulness.

It is essentially this: moment after moment mindfulness is what concentration is in this practice. The continuity of mindfulness is what establishes that concentration, which is where the capacity to see clearly comes from.

We've talked about a lot of these things that I'm going to explore tonight in different ways, maybe touching on them in light ways here and there, but I'm just going to put them all together.

Sayadaw pointed to really understanding the value of practice. He said if we really understood the value of practice, we wouldn't stop practicing. This points to faith, really. Carol spoke about faith the other day and that sense of taking refuge in awareness and wisdom. When we taste the value that awareness and wisdom have for us, it inspires us to continue practice. Carol spoke about the five faculties and how faith, confidence, is a condition that supports energy. When faith is strong in our hearts, when we have a sense of the value of practice, quite naturally there's a motivation to practice. You don't have to try so hard. It's just where our heart wants to go.

Beginning to really notice—and this is the place where we've pointed to—notice what it's like when you are aware, when you are seeing clearly. What does it feel like? This is how we begin to feel the benefits of awareness and wisdom. We feel the kind of spaciousness around a challenge. So many of you have pointed to this in the practice meetings: seeing a challenging experience arising, and yet being able to have a new relationship with it, not so much a problem. I've asked several of you, "What is that like? What does that feel like?" To have that different relationship—that's really connecting to the value of the practice. It's connecting to how it feels to be attending with mindfulness and wisdom. It feels valuable. We understand it's valuable. We understand it's worthwhile.

And so the more we recognize that value, the more it supports our natural inclination towards engaging.

Faith. Confidence. Understanding the value of practice is a support for continuity. We've talked about making effort in this practice, and this is a way to cultivate a momentum to engage. As I said this morning, Sayadaw said the only work we give our minds is to remind ourselves to be aware. This is a form of effort in this practice—just this reminding. But it's so light. It is so light. Aware. Aware.

At the beginning, we've talked about using these questions: Am I aware? Or simply, Aware, perhaps? And, What is obvious? As we begin to recognize the experience of being aware a little more clearly, and as we begin to feel into a momentum of awareness, then it might be useful to explore backing off on the questions. As Carol mentioned, not even actually asking the question in the mind—it's more like you're nodding at experience. This. And aware. Touching into the experience.

The gentle effort we make gets tuned to the momentum. And the more momentum there is, the less we have to put in that personal effort, the less we have to try.

I often give this analogy—many of you have heard it, so you'll hear it again here—of riding on a scooter. Not a motorized scooter, but a kick scooter, one of those where you stand with your foot on the platform and tap the ground to get yourself going. At the beginning, you have to tap pretty frequently to build momentum. But after a little while, there's momentum, and you can put your foot up and just ride for a bit. Then you start to feel into when the scooter gets a little wobbly, and you know you need to tap again.

It's like that with mindfulness. At the beginning, we need to remind ourselves more frequently: Aware of what? Maybe using those questions. But as momentum builds, we become familiar with the experience of that momentum—like getting familiar with riding on the scooter and knowing when that momentum is there. Then we can back off of how much we're reminding ourselves, like we back off of tapping on the ground.

And actually, on that scooter, if you're going at a pretty good pace, maybe even with a little downhill—sometimes that happens with practice—we gain the momentum, and it really feels like it's carrying itself. Sometimes you can just ride for a ways. If you put your foot down at that point, it's actually going to get in the way. It's going to slow you down.

Likewise with mindfulness. If you're reminding yourself, be aware, be aware, be aware, and you're already aware, it's kind of getting in the way.

At one point Joseph had his own way of expressing this to me. I was going in for an interview, and I don't remember what I was reporting, but what he said in response I remember so clearly. He said, "If you go into a room and the light is already on, it doesn't make any sense to keep flipping the light switch."

It's that kind of thing. There was a little too much vigor in my practice, trying to connect with being aware. This is part of the art form of the effort in this practice—understanding and knowing how light it can be. And knowing when we do need to engage, when we do need to bring in that question: Am I aware? What's obvious?

Mindfulness is a wholesome quality of mind. It's a mental formation, one of those fabrications I was talking about this morning. It has conditions. It is conditioned.

It arises in dependence on conditions, and it also conditions our mind. As with other wholesome qualities, recognizing mindfulness, being aware of it, being cognizant of it—knowing what it feels like, knowing when it's there, when it gets weak—cultivates mindfulness like any wholesome state. Being aware of love supports the conditions for more love to arise. Mindfulness is similar in that way. Recognizing mindfulness is a supportive condition for mindfulness.

And so mindfulness arises and passes like other experiences, like other qualities of mind. I think it's useful, in terms of cultivating a continuity of mindfulness, to understand what we're exploring here: can we create conditions for mindfulness to arise more frequently? I have found it really useful to take an interest in that arising and passing of mindfulness—not as a form of judgment, but to begin to get curious about what are the conditions that support mindfulness. What are the conditions that allow it to be here? What are the conditions in which it gets weak? It's like studying this quality of mind. Sayadaw U Pandita said mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. And we can explore it, as well as anger and aversion and greed and love and compassion and patience. We can get curious about mindfulness.

We often think of the comings and goings of mindfulness as being a problem. We would call it, when mindfulness goes, "the mind wandered." And when it comes back, it means it had wandered, and that was a problem. We've talked about this already, especially looking at that moment of mindfulness returning, and I want to highlight it again here because it is a support for cultivating continuity—to recognize when mindfulness returns. In that moment, if we're not judging ourselves, we're recognizing: this is what it's like for mindfulness to come back. This is the experience of awareness. This is what it's like. That recognition is a great place to begin to get familiar with the experience, with the feeling of it.

So there are these moments of mindfulness returning. We could call it unprompted mindfulness. Many meditation practices work by prompting mindfulness, and I'd say when we're exploring the question "Am I aware? What's obvious?"—that's a prompting of mindfulness. That's this technique's version of

prompting mindfulness. We are aware, and we're reminding ourselves to continue to be aware. That's a prompting of mindfulness, and that is one way to encourage and cultivate mindfulness.

But these moments when mindfulness just returns—those are moments of unprompted mindfulness. They simply arise. There are a lot of them, and they're such a great place to begin to recognize the quality of awareness, the effortless quality of it. We've talked about this, so I won't dwell on it too much, but I want to point to this: recognizing the moment of mindfulness returning is a support for continuity. If we think about continuity as meaning we have to hold on to mindfulness, we have to be constantly prompting it, then those moments when mindfulness returns will seem like a problem. But they're another support for continuity—those moments of noticing mindfulness returning.

And then there are the places or ways that we lose mindfulness. Often we might notice these in retrospect, and I'd encourage this as another kind of exploration: where am I losing mindfulness? This can involve noticing, through the arc of your day, the places or times of day, the activities you're doing, or the mind states that are happening where mindfulness tends to get lost. What I want to encourage here is curiosity. What happens in those times? What happens in those situations?

Curiosity is a very natural motivator for energy. It's a great support for cultivating continuity, for cultivating the momentum of mindfulness. So being curious about where we lose mindfulness, where the attention wants to go.

Now I want to say this, really emphasizing the curiosity, because there can be a tendency if you begin to recognize places or times that you tend to lose mindfulness. For instance, you might notice you lose awareness in particular activities like your yogi job, or when you're putting on your shoes and your coat to go outside, or when you go into your room—that's another one. Sometimes we lose mindfulness when we go into our room. So there may be particular places or activities where we notice, over the days, that we begin to recognize: "Yeah, whenever I go into that yogi job, I just lose it," or "whenever I go into the bathroom, I lose it."

Recognizing where we lose awareness, we can bring curiosity to what happens in those situations. Not as a way to double down, to say to yourself, "Okay, I know I lose awareness when I go to my yogi job, so I am going to be mindful. I'm walking, walking, walking. I'm picking up the knife. I'm chopping, chopping, chopping." That kind of forcing, trying to stay present in a situation where you've noticed in the past that your mind tends to get lost—you're not going to learn that way.

There's something going on. When our mindfulness gets lost, something is happening. We've missed something. We've not seen something. It may just be a habit of some kind. It could be a picking up on some kind of excitement—there are so many different things that might happen.

For instance, going to a yogi job, if you're in a yogi job with other people, maybe there's a little bit of a feeling of excitement. Even though you're not talking, you're in a community. It feels social, and so there's

a little bit of orienting to what the other people are doing. And maybe that's where the mind gets lost—it doesn't notice that it has gotten really happy about being in this little community of veggie choppers. So it's missed something.

As you notice a place or location or activity where you tend to lose mindfulness, as you're heading there, just get curious: What happens? What happens there? Not to try to change or force anything, but just be curious. Something goes on. Something happens in this situation. Can the curiosity help you to recognize what is it that has caught the mind? What is it that catches the mind?

And that is the basic encouragement no matter what way we lose awareness. I'm going to go through some other examples of different kinds of experiences.

We might lose awareness with painful experience, painful body sensation, difficult bodily experience. I noticed this in my own practice. There were a couple different strategies that my mind used, but they all involved not being mindful when there was a lot of pain in my body. One of them was singing. My mind started singing, and it would be checked out. I would wake up singing and recognize, "Oh, so this is what happened." Originally, I'd wake up and say, "Oh, there's singing, and oh yeah, there's that pain." I would try to be mindful of the pain and it would just catch me and pull me in, and I would be aversive to it, and then I would start singing again.

At some point, through this kind of exploration, I began to notice that when I woke up in the singing, the mind was not bothered by the pain. There was a little moment there of being aware and not being bothered by the pain. That was kind of interesting to me. It was like, "Huh, my mind has figured out how not to be bothered by this pain. It just doesn't know how to do it with awareness."

As I explored this, I realized that when there was awareness with the pain, the mind was magnetized and zoomed in on the pain. That was cultivating the aversion, and that was making things worse. When the mind went to the singing, it was basically a way to ignore the pain, a way to not be looking at the pain directly.

So I explored that as I came back. This was a strategy my mind had used to avoid pain—to get lost in singing. And I began to realize: I don't actually have to lose awareness when there's pain. And I don't have to be drawn into the pain either.

So I allowed that learning around what the mind was doing as it wandered, or what it was doing when it got caught in a situation like that with the painful bodily sensation. I used what the mind was doing as a way to learn something about how to be with the experience. And what it meant was being with the whole experience and not focusing in on the pain. That's what I learned. I saw that the mind is not bothered by the pain when it's not focusing on it. So maybe I can be aware and not zero in on looking at the pain.

Our minds have strategies that they've learned, and sometimes those strategies—well, we've talked about why our minds do these things, these habitual things. This is maybe another reason: in this case, my mind

was doing that in order to not be so stressed by the pain, and that was the only way it knew how to do that. Well, it knew a couple of ways. Another one was spacing out. It had figured out how to space out and not attend to the pain too. So there were a couple different strategies the mind had learned, but they generally involved not being mindful. And so I began to be curious about that—what might it mean? I saw that the focus on the pain was what was kind of amplifying it. So what might it mean?

Our minds have learned strategies to deal with challenging situations. They do the best they can in navigating our lives before we meet this practice. This creates all these habits, and they become our comfortable things, even if they're not necessarily ultimately that helpful. But our minds were doing the best they could. What can we learn from that? What can we learn from bringing mindfulness to what those habits are and how they function?

In that case, I saw that the habit functioned to decouple me from focusing so closely on the pain. Okay, maybe I can try to do that with awareness.

We also often lose mindfulness in habitual mind states—boredom, depression, anxiety, confusion, wanting, planning, thoughts of home. When we notice those habitual mind states, at some point we often will wake up into them. Recognizing in that moment what the experience is that we are waking up into. I talked about this as being like asking, "What planet are we on?" It may be around thoughts having created something, a world of some kind, or a mood maybe creates a feeling or a space. Boredom or confusion or anxiety. For me, depression was one that I tended to get lost in.

When we wake up into the experience, we begin to have a sense of what it means, what the experience is. Again, not to try to jump over it or to come back to something else. It's like, "Oh, it feels like this. It feels like this." Whatever thought had been happening, it feels like this. And that recognition—that kind of beginning to recognize those habitual states in the moment that we wake up—gives us a familiarity, a sense of what the quality of that mind is. And it may begin to help us to see it as it's coming into being.

When we tend to get lost in a habitual state of mind, something that comes back a lot, we're often in it or it's already there before we really notice it. But this kind of recognizing—okay, this is what I tend to get lost in, just that familiarity of recognizing that—then we might start to recognize, and also the recognition of when it's not there, we might start to see, "Oh, here's the climate starting to change." The feeling of a mood starting to shift. I remember feeling like the self-hatred was just starting to descend, really starting to feel the beginning of it. Instead of being already lost in it or caught in it, beginning to see how it arises.

This supports us because when we can begin to see how something arises, there can be a little bit more curiosity again about what this is. What is it that gets me caught here? What is the mind doing here?

There was one retreat where I was experiencing a lot of anger. It was a situation that had happened on the retreat with somebody there that I was in relationship with. And every time I was in their proximity, there would be some anger, and then sometimes just thinking about it later. It was something that had

happened at the retreat that had generated this anger, and it just kept coming back—the memory about it, all of this.

And boy, it was my anger retreat. I got to see anger in spades. I felt the pain of it. It's kind of like, well, why does it go here? It is so painful. So many of you have asked that kind of question.

At one point, I watched it so much that I got to really feel the beginnings of it. On a retreat at home—I think it was a three-month retreat—Carol said, "Get to know the smell of it coming." And that's what it's like, just the feeling of it starting to put itself together.

With the anger, at one point I saw this. I got to see just the very beginnings of it. And it felt warm and pleasant and powerful. Just a split second later, it turned into pain. But just that split second at the beginning of the anger, it felt like I'm in control here. I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm going to do.

Quickly it became very unpleasant, but the very first split second of it was pleasant. I was shocked. That's the hook. That's what the mind is hooked to there. It gets hooked to that feeling of control.

So we can, just again through being willing to watch these patterns—just watch them, watch them, watch them—we don't always get to see the beginnings, but we're learning something wherever we are waking up with it. Whether it's waking up into it, what are you seeing there?

We also can lose awareness when attention shifts. This is one of the reasons why I like to emphasize noticing the shift of attention early, especially in this style of practice. I think a lot of those moments when our mind just kind of wanders off, it's because we haven't noticed the attention has shifted. We haven't noticed that the attention picked up on something. Our agenda was someplace else, but the attention picked up on something else. We haven't noticed that shift.

We have the agenda to be meditating. We are sitting here, thinking, "I'm going to be doing this." With this style of practice, it's more open—we're receiving whatever arises. But there can be things that arise where we still have this idea that that's not the practice. Those moments of the attention shifting to something, or perhaps shifting to something we're not so clear about—we maybe have an idea of mindfulness as being where objects are really clear and precise. And so if the attention shifts to one of those more diffuse or vague experiences, if we've got the habit of noticing only precise experiences, we may not notice that the attention has shifted to a different kind of experience.

So those shifts of attention, really cultivating curiosity about them—for me that has been one of the things that's really supported continuity. Notice: oh, the attention's changed. And again, not to have any agenda for where the attention needs to be. We're not in charge of the attention in this practice. We are curious about how the attention is being shaped.

I mentioned this one too, so I'll just touch on it briefly. The mind can go into habitual states where we tend to get lost—spacing out, sleepiness, those foggy, dull states of mind. We can have the idea or the sense that

they're inherently not mindful states, a belief that we can't be mindful in them. But it's not necessary for mindfulness to get lost in those states. And so again, curiosity. This has been such an interesting thing for me to explore.

When the mind starts feeling really slippery and just kind of drifting out, when it feels like it stops attending to things and just goes—rather than thinking, "I need to focus," we can ask, "Oh, what does that feel like? What does it feel like for the mind to just go, to feel like it floats off?"

The feeling that it's floating off, we often think of as being somehow a problem, but it's just another mind state. We can be aware with any mind state. Just interest. Interest in this.

And again, with some of these states, it really is interest that supports our capacity to see them. Sleepiness, for instance. If you are exploring, trying to be aware of sleepiness, it's probably going to wake you up. So trying to be aware will shift the mind state. But it's possible to be aware *with* it, with curiosity. Aiming the attention alters the climate in the mind, and some experiences are more subtle—trying to look at them obscures the experience. That's what I'm trying to say. The energy that we might be using to look at something is grosser than what is actually happening.

So some of those states of the mind settling into quiet, or just releasing—seeing those experiences requires a different quality. It's more just interest that can allow that, not "I need to look at this." The momentum of mindfulness can begin to allow mindfulness to infuse states and experiences where we may tend to get lost.

I think this can happen as the practice deepens. Sometimes shifts of mind towards more subtle experience or new, unfamiliar states—those places too we can get lost. Mindfulness can get lost as the mind begins to settle, and I don't know what's actually going on, but it kind of feels like the mindfulness and wisdom start to get interested in things that I don't have any idea about. There's less familiarity. As the practice deepens, there can be less familiarity for some of the objects, some of the experiences that happen.

And in those places, sometimes the mind can wander. Sometimes that has to do with unfamiliarity. Sometimes it has to do with a kind of "whoa, that's scary, I don't know what that is," and we pop out of it. That's not so much the mind wandering or getting lost—it's more like it just pops out of something. But sometimes we can go into a state, sink into it maybe, and not have so much awareness in there, partly through unfamiliarity.

The momentum of mindfulness and curiosity can be very helpful here with these kinds of things. I would play with this over and over again—just sit, let my mind do its thing, and then I would notice it was gone. Drifted. It just slipped out. There was a lot of clarity, seeing very clearly, and then suddenly mindfulness is gone. And then mindfulness would return. "Wow, it went away. It just slipped out. What happened?" And so I would let it settle again, and then it would slip out again. Just over and over, curiosity: What's happening there? What's happening there?

Again, with that kind of thing, we can't try to see it or hold on to the mindfulness. It really is a patience for seeing something that's unfamiliar.

Also, as the practice deepens, as there's more settledness, there can be other flavors of the mind getting lost. One teacher, Michelle McDonald, talked about what she called the purity-purification cycle—the mind settles, becomes more pure, more wholesome qualities arising: more ease, more settledness, more peace, more spaciousness. And then sometimes in that kind of space, for different reasons, the mind just kind of gets complacent there, isn't really clearly aware of that, and then it picks up on one of its old habit patterns and starts to ruminate. Or it starts to plan its next retreat because this one is so good.

It just goes out and gets lost in those places of purity. There's a lot of clarity in those states, and they can be places where mindfulness slips away too.

Sometimes in that settled space, it's like conditions are being created for something that hasn't been seen, something that's been held back, held down for a long time. Finally there's room for it to be seen. And sometimes those patterns—deep, old conditioning—arise in those spaces. It's not a mistake. Sometimes it feels like the mind recognizes: okay, you're ready now for this.

So there can be these cycles of ease and peace and settledness, and then seeing—it's like another door, another room has been opened, revealing material that hasn't been seen in a very long time, or has never really been clearly explored or looked at. The purification, the seeing. For me, this was a useful framing: Oh, it's purification. That's it. This understanding eased my mind a little bit around the process.

I'll end with talking about one of the classic teachings on continuity, from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—clear comprehension. Many of you are probably familiar with that section where it talks about one acting with clear comprehension, or "in full awareness" as it's sometimes translated. While going forward and returning, one acts in full awareness. While looking forward and away, one acts in full awareness. While flexing and extending one's limbs, one acts in full awareness.

This is pointing to all activities. The sutta mentions even while defecating and urinating—I love that it includes what might seem like the most profane activity. One acts in full awareness. So it really is encouraging us with all activities, as we've been practicing here: while chopping vegetables, while going for a walk, while eating a meal, while getting dressed in the morning.

The key in this sutta, however, is the phrase "full awareness"—one acts in full awareness. Not just that we engage with all activities, but with full awareness. The Pāli is *sampajañña*.

The definition of sampajañña is not given in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, but it is defined elsewhere, and that definition is something like: one clearly comprehends when feelings, thoughts, and perceptions are known as they arise, persist, and pass away.

If we take that phrase and put it into the sutta: while going forward and returning, one understands

feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. When flexing and extending one's limbs, one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

This is a very broad awareness being pointed to. Feelings, thoughts, and perceptions is a kind of stand-in for three of the aggregates: feeling, perception, and mental formation. With all activities.

To me, this is the culmination. This is what's pointed to in this sutta. It's a pretty high bar: one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away while doing all activities. But this is what starts to happen as the momentum of mindfulness develops. As there is more momentum, we start to see feelings, thoughts, and perceptions with whatever we're doing. This broad awareness can see so much at one time. Carol calls it 360-degree mindfulness—just aware of the whole of experience. And this also points to attuning to the impermanent nature of experience, bringing in the wisdom side as well.

I don't feel like we can really *do* this; to me, it feels like something that arises. As we cultivate the momentum of mindfulness, as we cultivate this capacity to see experience, this begins to be available.

One last piece about continuity: when I first heard talks about this, I thought I had to work really hard for a really long time, developing mindfulness all day long, before I'd see anything, before I'd have any kind of insight or understanding. But what I've seen in my own practice is what I'll call little bursts of continuity. There are times when, for a few moments—three seconds—conditions come together for us to see in a moment, while we're doing whatever we're doing, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away in a split second. This can happen in daily life.

The intention to cultivate the continuity of mindfulness, to notice mindfulness when it returns, to prompt it with light effort—this creates conditions where at times there may be just a moment of something arising.

There was a moment for me early in my practice—and I wouldn't have even known to describe it this way at the time—but I had been cultivating awareness of anger, just practicing with that. And then there was one moment in my kitchen where I was cutting an apple, and in a split second I got a burst of that continuity. For just two seconds, a few moments. And in those few moments, I saw a whole array of things arise. I saw thoughts related to what I was doing arise. I saw other thoughts related to those, connected to anger. And I saw the whole mushrooming of anger that could begin but hadn't begun—all within a split second. A burst of continuity revealed feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

It was a very powerful moment. The first time, I think, that I ever really saw. It was the moment that let me understand: this practice works, and I'm going to be doing this for the rest of my life. Because it was so clear that this was a path for understanding the mind and being released from painful mind states. And it happened in a very brief moment.

Sometimes we can get these little bursts of continuity. But they only come with the intention to cultivate

that continuity.

Let us end with the sharing of blessings. Appreciating the value of practice—this is what we've been exploring—and sharing it. Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice, may my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue, my mother, my father, and my relatives, the sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world—may the highest gods and evil forces, celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth, and the Lord of Death—may those who are friendly, indifferent, or hostile—may all beings receive the blessings of my life. May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice and through this act of sharing, may all desires and attachments quickly cease, and all harmful states of mind, until I realize Nibbāna. In every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind with mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor. May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge. Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma. The Solitary Buddha is my noble guide. The Sangha is my supreme support. Through the supreme power of all these, may darkness and delusion be dispelled.

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