Bodhisatta's Birth to Renunciation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 46:02

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I wanted to continue with the Buddha's life, and there's something I should have mentioned in the last talk, but better late than never: the idea of spiritual reading as opposed to the way we would normally read.

Normally we read with an effort to accumulate knowledge, trying to gather information. But spiritual reading—reading for spiritual purposes—was developed best, I think, by the Benedictines. They had three methods called Lectio, Meditatio, and Contemplatio.

One reads an inspiring book—say a book by Ajahn Chah or something written from the heart rather than an academic text, although even academic books can inspire. You read it as if you're reading poetry or listening to music. You're reading along and of course it's going in. Every so often there will be a paragraph, a sentence, or a phrase which seems to hit, to catch you. What you do is keep repeating that until you've absorbed it, like you might listen to a piece of music over and over again or read a poem repeatedly. You're not thinking about it. You're allowing the heart to grasp it—an intuitive feel.

When you feel you've had enough of that, you stop still. Maybe some thoughts come around it, some ideas. You can follow them for a little while and develop them. Then you just drop them and fall into silence. Then you go to the next passage.

What you may find is that it has an inspiring effect. It makes you want to go and sit. And it's interesting because it pops out when you're talking every so often. You haven't tried to remember it, but it's there, more deeply absorbed. In a sense, that's the purpose of all art: to allow us to re-experience in our own way what somebody else has experienced.

T.S. Eliot called it the objective correlative. What he meant by that, as I understand it, was that I have an experience and I want to pass it on to you. I have to find some symbolic way in which your heart and mind can communicate with mine. So I have an idea—say, music. It comes out as a feeling, say joy. Joy comes up in the heart and I'm a musician, so I want to express that joy through a certain medium.

And it's specific culturally, isn't it? Unless you've listened to Chinese or Japanese music or even Indian music, you've got to get into that symbolism, that way of expressing these particular emotions and understandings. That way, two people can communicate at a deeper level than just an intellectual one. If I say I'm depressed, that's one thing. But if I write a piece of music that makes you depressed, then we have some deeper communication.

So when I'm going through the life of the Buddha here, I'm really just allowing thoughts to arise in that way and seeing what comes up. Often when I go through the same material, different thoughts come up because other information from somewhere else has come in, and other feelings arise. Every time I reread the life of the Buddha, there's always something new that comes up for me around it.

This isn't an academic approach. Whether it's history or myth is in a sense immaterial, because it lies there within the Buddhist tradition as a sort of archetype, as an exemplar whom we're following. And anyway, I'm not an academic—I'm a would-be academic. So you have to take everything I say with a pinch of salt.

We got to the point where the Bodhisatta was about to be born. He was born somewhere around 2,300 to 2,500 years ago. When you consider that length of time, and you consider how many religious leaders have probably appeared, started something, and then their teaching has disappeared—one example would be the Jains. If you look at the ancient maps, the Jains were just about as numerous at some point, maybe even more numerous than Buddhists in India. But somehow they fizzled out and are now down to somewhere around three million, which in the population of India is very small. This doesn't mean that the teachings of the Nigantha were wrong, but there's obviously some feeling there of fading out. It may grow again. But there are lots of little religions, especially these days with gurus popping up here and there—that sudden rush of interest, it builds up, and then it slowly dies away.

So when you think that this is a 2,500-year-old tradition, it inspires faith and inspires a certain trust.

Remember that faith in our understanding is not a belief. A belief is putting faith in a statement. So if you were to say, "I believe the Buddha was enlightened," you're in great danger of being deluded. There's a difference between believing that statement and trusting it. And in a sense, we don't know, do we? We don't know what he was talking about until we get there. And when we get there, we don't know whether it's the end. There may be something more. Who knows?

So it's a case of trusting, and the trust grows as we practice because we get the benefits of it. That leads us towards the goal, and hopefully we get a peek of it, a little touch of it. At that point, faith becomes immovable because now we've had a taste of that end we're moving towards.

When we consider that for 2,500 years millions of people have been practicing in this way, have been contemplating the life of the Buddha, and it's affected them, and cultures have grown around it—this is part of the basis of our faith. The fact that it's been such a long and deep tradition, and that it's spread across cultures. Obviously similar to Christianity and Islam, which have been able to go far beyond their cultural bounds and move into different cultures, being developed by them in their own way. There is, I think, a trust that comes with something which has such an ancient history.

So in the sense of this recollection, thinking of that raises a feeling of faith, raises a feeling of trust. And you stay with it. You delight in it. Remember that part of our practice is going through all this difficult

material. But the other part is developing what is beautiful in us. When something joyful comes up, don't kick it out. Don't say, "Oh, where's all my depression and anxiety?" When you're reading in the library or listening to a tape and suddenly you get this lovely pīti come up, this joy around the teaching, this interest—then stop the tape, close the book, and just stay with it. Let the heart absorb it. Don't rush through it.

That age, of course, just as an aside, was quite an age for human beings because at the same time there was Moses, Lao Tzu in China, Socrates. It's known in the history books as the Axial Age. Something happened in human consciousness. Something moved, something turned. And from that you can say history begins. Written history, the history that we know, actually begins around that time. History in India begins with the life of the Buddha, frankly. That's when it begins. History in the sense of facts begins.

So anyway, he's born, and being a very advanced being, he's chosen his mother and father, and seems to have chosen rather well. His father is a local potentate, and his mother also belongs to a family which is rich and powerful. He's got the good kamma there. And as you know, she wants to go home to have her child, and he's born under these sāla trees on the way. She gives birth in the park at Lumbini.

So this is the theme, isn't it? The Buddha and nature. He's born under a tree, he's enlightened under a tree, and he finally dies under a tree. And that connection with nature—something that in our society you can obviously lose, especially living in a city.

I remember I was once at a meditation center and this little chick had fallen on the ground. It had fallen out of a nest. And being a townie, I just looked at it and wondered what to do. I'm looking at this chick thinking, "Now, what do I do with this?" So I went to pick it up and put it on the wall just in case the cat would take it. And as I bent down to pick it up, it bit at me and I leapt out of my skin. This tiny little bird scared me to death. So eventually I did finally get it on the wall, and I don't know what happened to the little thing. And I was saying afterwards, probably if I'd found that in the town, I'd have stamped on it and put it in the bin.

That's how detached you can become from living beings and nature.

So again, it's a case of simply recollecting on these things and what nature means to us. Walking in nature, being close to it, hugging a tree occasionally. How close are we to the ground, to the actual earth that we live on? Do we ever sit and consider how we are utterly dependent on what the earth is giving us in terms of the produce of the ground? The air that we breathe. The water that we drink.

And that understanding of the body being in this constant change—it's like a double-edged fountain with stuff coming in through one aperture and then escaping through all the rest. You get the feeling of the body not being at all static, but in a state of flow. It's digesting and giving away, receiving and digesting and giving away. You get this feeling of being a little bit part of that process that we see in nature.

Then, of course, there's the consideration of the importance of our parents. The Buddha chose these two

people—well, I doubt if we chose the people whom we ended up being born to. Just to recollect what we owe our parents. Usually we hold on to the more sticky, bad memories that we have of them, but when you consider what our parents actually did for us, then you come to the conclusion of the Buddha: that even if you were to carry your mother and father on your shoulders all your life, you would not have repaid them their gift. Even if they kicked you around a lot, you're still here. You made it.

Parents being so much part of our makeup—even the little habits we have, just the way that we do things, we pick up from our mother and father. That intimacy we have, especially with our mothers. And then, of course, his mother dies within a week. One wonders what effect that might have had on a week-old baby. We know that the intimacy is already there in the womb. The child actually knows the mother's voice, the feel of the mother. Having tasted her milk and got close to her, and then suddenly there's a change. There's a change of environment. And although it's her mother's sister who takes over, one wonders how that early child would have been affected by that.

Knowing later on what identity crisis he goes through, his existential crisis with sickness, old age, and death, there's a suggestion from our own depth psychology that this was the beginning of his suffering in terms of that awakening to loss. Never mind the birth process.

So now he's born, and the next thing is that he is recognized by the seer, the ascetic Asita. The ascetic says he's either going to be a world-conquering monarch, or he's going to be a fully self-enlightened being.

This business of the world-conquering monarch is like an alter ego that runs through the scriptures. There's always a picture of this monarch who rules the world out of the Dhamma, by way of the precepts. It runs almost concurrent with the idea of the Buddha being the fully self-enlightened being. In other words, if he hadn't chosen that path, this is what he would have done. He would have set his horse loose—this is the way it was done—and followed his horse, and wherever the horse went, he'd have conquered, and eventually the whole world would have been brought under his Dhamma rule.

The story about the Chakravartins is that finally one of them doesn't keep the precepts, and the whole thing begins to collapse. There's one discourse which is rather interesting from a modern point of view—well, from any point of view, but specifically these days—and that is that poverty is the root of social evil. That's what the particular discourse says. And that's something we can think about.

But this idea of the split within us, between the worldly life and the spiritual life—that stays with us all the way, doesn't it? That stays with us all the way. Not to say that we're going to become world-conquering monarchs, but there's always that pull towards the world. What is the world? It's riches, isn't it? Riches, power, fame, and sensual pleasures—the pleasures of life.

And so even here, when you're doing your meditation and you get that feeling—which is not sustainable from the body's point of view—that you might have a cup of tea and there's no need for it, then you might say, "Oh, there's the world-conquering monarch." I have to let go of that, and then get back onto your seat.

If you consider that there's always that split within us—one part renouncing the world and one being dragged away into it—it's just good to see it in these terms.

So here the Buddha has been prophesied that he's going to take the one path or the other. And now he's brought up in a very worldly way. Once his father knows that he could shoot off and become an ascetic, he definitely doesn't want that. He wants him to follow him in the family and build up the empire. He surrounds him with pleasures, basically. This is the tale. But I would have thought that his particular group, the

the warrior caste, the Kshatriya caste, which were the dominant caste in that part of India. As you move towards what is now Bengal, it would have been the Brahmins. But in his part of India, it was definitely the warrior caste which were the top caste.

That's why you'll see him always taking the mickey out of the Brahmins in the scriptures. He always says, "Well, a true Brahmin does this and does that. He doesn't do this." He never talks about the warrior caste—the true warrior caste is always the Brahmin. So he's knifing occasionally, in, of course, a very compassionate way, I'm suggesting. It's usually Brahmins that are approaching him when he's talking about Brahmins.

So he's there in his palaces, and we go through this whole business of an identity crisis. It's very interesting, really, from the point of view of the general growth of our psychology. He's married around about the age of sixteen—this is the myth, which would have been normal in those days. We know in India you get married pretty soon. And somewhere in his mid-twenties, I would have thought, this happens. And this happens, I think, to a lot of people. It's the first sort of crisis in life about letting go—like youth is passing. There's something within the person which is saying, "Actually, let's get serious."

So it's usually around about twenty-five onwards that people get married, they get a job, and they stop being fools. And they think more about what they can get out of society. And this carries on, doesn't it, until the midlife crisis when you're looking for a bridge to throw yourself off.

In that time of the age of twenty-five, I'm not at all surprised that he suddenly begins to waken up to the reality of life itself, having had such a good time for twenty-five years—sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And this crisis has two parts, which is rather interesting.

The first part is this: he's had a good old party, and there's a disgust that comes up. This is the story of Gautama Buddha, and it's the Jataka—it's one of the tales, and it's creative. It's got some lovely passages. And here it's describing how he woke up after this night, and this is what he saw:

As the Bodhisattva woke up and sat cross-legged upon the couch, he saw those women—see, these are the women who had been enticing him and dancing—who had lain aside their musical instruments and were sleeping, some of them with saliva pouring out of their mouths, some with their bodies wet with saliva, some grinding their teeth, some talking in their sleep, some groaning, some with gaping mouths, and some others

with their clothes in disorder, revealing plainly those parts of the body which should be kept concealed for fear of shame. He saw the disorder in which they were and became all the more detached from sensual pleasure. The large terrace of his mansion, magnificently decorated and resembling the abode of Sakka, king of the gods, appeared to him as an existence, seemed to him a house in flames. He made the inspired utterance, "Alas, this is beset with obstacles, alas, it is constricted," and his mind was greatly drawn towards renunciation.

Now, unfortunately, it stresses the business of disgust. And to me, that's always been not a very good word. They often talk about, they translate this word *nibbidā*, which also you'll see comes up in one of the sermons—vipassanā knowledge is *nibbidā*. For some reason, they always describe it as disgust.

Now, to me, the word disgust always has an aversion to it. But if one were to enter the spiritual life with aversion, then obviously there's some feeling there of pushing away, of not wanting. And that will come back upon you because you have to face that disgust. You have to go beyond disgust.

Sometimes it's translated as boredom. But I think the real word in English is *weariness*. Weariness. When you've done something often enough which has brought you pleasure, you get weary. You might listen to the same piece of music and get a lot out of it, and then you become weary of it. It's like you've had enough of it.

And one of the things that you might have experienced is, for instance, playing tiddlywinks with a child. I don't know what you call it in the States—it's just flicking little things into a pot. And a three-year-old might come to you and say, "Come and play tiddlywinks." So because you want to communicate and you enjoy being with the three-year-old—they're delightful little beings—you play tiddlywinks. And after a good ten or fifteen minutes of tiddlywinks, when all the little things are in the pot, you think it's been a good little game in your way. But the kid's jumping up and down saying, "More! More! More!"

And suddenly you find yourself saying, "Well, I've got to get on, I've got to do this," because another game would definitely make you feel weary.

So it's that sort of quality—if you can get the idea of world weariness, like you've had enough. Enough of trying to get rich, enough of getting into the rat race, enough of worrying about this, worrying about that. And it's not that you're disgusted with it or angry with it. It's just that you've had enough.

I had a friend who was something of a jazz follower, and he went along to this jazz concert. Partway through, there just came this sense of weariness. It wasn't disgust. It was just, "Enough." And that was it. He didn't need it again.

So there's something about staying with a pleasure. Be careful that you don't push pleasure away out of fear, but actually experience the pleasure fully. If you have an obsession with something—like food, say you're a chocoholic—take a piece of chocolate and really nibble at it. Make every nibble worth its salt. Completely taste it, let it melt around your tongue, experience it fully throughout your mouth. Do

everything you can to get the fullness out of that. And you may find that after one piece, you've actually had enough.

Because normally speaking, when we're obsessed with something, when we're addicted to something, we're feeding into something else. We're trying to feed something deeper. And when you see how unsatisfying that chocolate can actually be, one becomes weary of chocolate.

I always remember during student days one tends to drink a bit. And I went through this period of getting absolutely paralytic. I don't think you have this syndrome in the United States so much, but in Britain we have what's called binge drinking. You just drink and drink until you drop. I know people on the continent seem to be getting into it now, which isn't a very good thing.

But I remember waking up—literally I woke up in the gutter. I woke up in the early morning and my head was in the gutter, my body lying on the pavement. I turned over and thought, "Oh my God, this is terrible." I got up with this throbbing head, feeling sick. The closest place to me was a graveyard, so I entered into the graveyard and lay on top of a grave because I was feeling so awful.

And it slowly dawned upon me that the suffering I was getting from the pleasure wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth getting that drunk. So I set myself this task: the next time I'd get tipsy, but I wouldn't go over the top. And to my surprise, I really enjoyed myself. I came off all that binge drinking and still have a decent liver.

Sometimes there's a lovely little poem from Blake which I was trying to find. He says it so beautifully—that the road to salvation is often through the road of excess. In other words, you get to this point where you've saturated yourself so much with something that you just don't want it anymore. You're utterly weary with it.

So when it comes to pleasure, especially here, make it a real exercise in food to get in contact with what pleasure actually is. Get in contact with the tongue. When you approach the food, get in contact with the body. There's hunger there, and this hunger is mixed. It's both a natural appetite coming from the body, but there's also greed there—a seeking of happiness in food, a seeking of relief. I mean, after that sitting, you really want to have some happiness. So there's this seeking of happiness in the food, and that's greed.

As you approach the table and put food on your plate, just be aware of how much you're putting. Be aware of the feelings and the contact you're making with the food, the way the mouth is salivating. Remind yourself you can always go for seconds. Then when you're sitting in front of the plate, just wait.

Get in contact with the body and just feel that magnet. You want to become the food. What did we have today? Ghetto? You want to become that food. And then, mindfully making that intention, lifting, scooping, lifting. And as that food touches the tongue, you get this amazing explosion of delight.

Now stay with that, stay with that at that physical level, and make it very clear to yourself. This is taste, this is the physicality, the basic ground upon which all my happiness rests. There's two inches of skin on

top of the tongue. At this moment, my happiness is dependent on that. And I'm chewing, I'm feeling the texture of it, and I'm actually feeling the sensations of pleasure.

What is pleasure? That's the question. What is pleasure? It's not a question of trying to describe it, but of direct experience—the tongue in delight. And then when that's really clear in your mind, when you've penetrated it, you might take a few bites—sometimes even at the beginning, it depends how you want to tackle this—and you can come away a little bit and see that it's surrounded with this joy. That's the mind, the heart. It's delighted in this food.

And then if you stay off it like that, especially if you just leave the fork on the table and stay there looking at the food, you can see that there is this desire for the sensual pleasure, this desire to eat more. Somehow what was being satisfied when we were eating now becomes like a magnet, like a drawer, sucking you into the plate.

If you can just stay with that—and all we're doing is investigating. Because remember, part of it is natural. Part of it is appetite. You've got to eat. Just stay with it.

And then as you keep eating and investigating these three qualities—the basic sensual stimuli coming into the brain, which the mind is working with to produce an idea: spaghetti, lettuce. What are the sensations it comes up with when it says spaghetti, lettuce? And you're aware of the delight. Delight in food—there's nothing unskillful about that. The heart should respond with delight to things.

But there is something twisting it, something putting a kink in it—that consciousness wanting to seek delight, to somehow identify with it, to grasp it, to attach to it. You might feel it as a sort of magnet, a draw, being sucked in. And if we keep eating like that, very mindfully, at some point we begin to get these really clear signals from the body: enough. Enough. Now, you can't always trust that, because if you have some emotion in the body, if you feel a bit anxious or something, then it's tight and it doesn't take all that much food. But let's say, generally speaking, you are relaxed, you're in a decent mood. The body begins to give you these signals: enough, enough.

Now normally we override that and just go for the cream cake. But here, because we're strictly doing our meditation, we hang on in there and we feel the override more deeply. More. And you hang on in there. You wait, and wait, and wait, right to the very end of that. Right to the very end.

What we want to make a distinction between is the satisfaction—to use that word—the satisfaction of eating something, of fulfilling desire. That satisfaction, remember, increases our attachment, increases our desire, and after a little while we want more, more, more. So that's satisfaction.

And then there's contentment, which is when the mind is not in a state of desire. The practice is to taste those two as quite separate experiences, and to know that contentment is a figure of the nirvanic mind. One of the qualities of

the unconditioned mind is that there is no desire. So we can experience that by watching right to the end point when the desire just goes out, right at the end. Like a light on a wick, it just goes and it's out. And then just catch that peace in the mind, that contentment.

When the Buddha is asked—when somebody complains to him, a deva complains and says, "Look, this training is very hard." He says, "Well, it is. But people do it, and they attain liberation. And Nibbana." And the deva says, "Nibbana, yeah, but so what?" And the Buddha says, "Well, when you get liberated, you are contented and with it happy." *Tutti sukha vahati*—you are contented and with it happy. So he's describing to this person his state of mind: contented and with it happy. That's the state of his heart—at peace, contented, happy.

Now, we can begin to taste that in these moments when especially desire has been very strong and we just watch it, feel it just dying away because we're not feeding it. And of course the added benefit of that is that we get over our obsession with food.

The next thing that moves the Buddha-to-be are what's known as the four signs, sometimes the three signs. You remember the story—he's out hunting three times, and he comes across a very sick person, a very old bent-over person, and a corpse. And in some stories, an ascetic sitting under a tree, in which case there's that hope: maybe there's a way out of this suffering.

So here he's entering into what we would call these days an identity crisis, some sort of existential crisis, a sort of feeling of the absurd. If you say to yourself that at the end of this life there is complete disappearance, complete annihilation, that's it—you're stuck with this terrible fact that we're conscious and we're suffering. The idea of suffering becomes absurd. It becomes ridiculous. It becomes unreasonable, beyond reason.

I thought to bring along the myth of Sisyphus, whom some of you might know. Going back to ancient Greek mythology, Sisyphus promoted navigation and commerce but was avaricious and deceitful. He killed travelers and wayfarers, and from Homer onwards Sisyphus was famed as the craftiest of men. When Thanatos—Mara, the king of death—came to fetch him, Sisyphus put him in fetters so that no one died, till Ares came and freed Thanatos and delivered Sisyphus to his custody.

But Sisyphus was not yet at the end of his resources. Before he died, he told his wife that when he was gone, she was not to offer the usual sacrifice to the dead. So in the underworld, he complained that his wife was neglecting her duty, and he persuaded Hades to allow him to go back to the upper world and expostulate with her. But when he got back to Corinth, he positively refused to return—until forcibly carried off by Hermes. It's a lovely story.

And of course, finally, he has to go to hell. He's in hell because he's been a bad boy. And his job is to roll a boulder up a hill. When it gets to the top, it rolls back down. So he's got to roll it back up. That's his job for eternity.

Albert Camus, one of my favorite writers—a French existentialist—actually wrote a book on Sisyphus, in which this became a motif for the absurdity of life. If you really, really believe all there is, is annihilation, why get up in the morning to roll that boulder up the hill, go to sleep, let it roll down again, and the next morning roll it back up?

When he was absolutely at one with this idea of the absurdity of suffering—which I think the existentialists understood very well; they definitely understood the First Noble Truth—he said that the only dignified way to approach this problem was to commit suicide. That was his answer. Luckily, he did not have to follow his own thought too far, because he sadly died in a car crash in 1956. He didn't have to take his logic into action, you might say.

So this idea of death—especially death, the whole process of dying, of illness, of growing old and then dying—unless there is some understanding, you have to really face the whole thing of annihilation.

Last week, when I was answering a question about afterlife and rebirth and all that sort of stuff, one thing I like to say is that in terms of the Buddhist teaching, the people who don't believe anything's going to happen when they die are, in my estimation, much closer to becoming liberated than those who do believe. For the simple reason that when we believe something is going to go on, it comforts us. The self feels comfort in the fact that, "Oh, when I die, I shall be born. I'll be happy if I'm born a rat, as long as I'm born, as long as I keep going—this *I*."

And so there's never any facing of the collapse of the self, which happens at death. I mean, that's what's supposed to happen. And even Muhammad, I think, said: you have to die before you die.

And I think even Christ expressed something similar. "Unless you are born again"—he put it in a more positive way—"you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven." So there's something about facing the horror of that point of complete loss of self, which is death, that is part of the process of our liberation. The future Buddha was so shaken by this that he decided to leave home.

So in your meditation, when these fears come up—these fears of sickness, old age, and death—go into them. They've come as messengers from the gods. They're there to awaken us. And remember that it's all delusion. It's all symbolic in the mind. You must always go beneath the thought, beneath the image, to the viscera, to the actual mental state that's driving it. You have to go into that fear, feel it, get accustomed to it, get comfortable with fear, and really allow it to express itself.

Because this fear, remember, is always generated out of that delusion of self. As we become accustomed to fear, that's Mara—the expression of our fear, the expression of our delusion. As we become accustomed to it, the sense of self begins to disappear. The sense of self manifests through these negative states, but as we become accustomed to them, we see them. If you remember, when Mara attacked the Buddha, Mara had to slink away because the Buddha saw him.

Seeing and feeling those emotions, burying ourselves in them, seeing them, even going beyond the idea of

an emotion, beyond the idea of a feeling, to the constituents themselves—the feeling of sickness, the feeling of tightness, the nausea, getting right down to the physical level—in so doing, it's a process of depersonalizing. You are depersonalizing the process. And that, of course, eventually relieves us, and hopefully we can stay steady in fear. Once we've lost our fear of fear, what is there to frighten us? And I shall quote your own very great president, Roosevelt, who said: What have we to fear but fear itself?

So I'd like to bring our talk to an end there. In one of our sessions I want to do an exercise rather than give a talk—an exercise on looking at the body, examining our relationship to the body, our feelings of disgust with the body. These are exercises that come out of the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse. And then toward the end, I'll move toward a little new age input of healing. I'll tell you when I'm doing it, so if you're not particularly attracted to that, you needn't come. Because somehow we have to find a way of making this deeply meaningful to us in ourselves, rather than it just being stories.

I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance to you, and I can only hope that even by the end of this course you will be fully liberated.

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