What Is True Compassion?

Sharda Rogell · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 53:06

Tonight I'd like to talk about compassion. I want to talk about this mostly because we've still been doing some compassion practice these last few weeks, and this week we're going to change to another Brahma Vihara—we're going to change to mudita, or joy. So I wanted to speak about compassion while a number of you were still involved in the compassion practice. It's a way of bringing it out more fully. But also because one way to actually talk about our practice is to talk about it as awakening to our compassionate heart. What we are actually settling into, when the mind drops—sometimes I like to think of when the mind drops out of the head area and down into the heart, into more of a fullness of our being—we begin to touch our compassion.

What is compassion? What is true compassion? I want to look at this quality of the heart when the heart is really free. There is a beautiful Tibetan tanka in the hall at Spirit Rock where I teach sometimes, in the community hall in the lower hall. It's a very, very large tanka, about the size of part of that wall over there. I love that it's there, right near the teaching podium. This tanka is a painting of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, depicted with a thousand arms. When you look at the painting, there's this whole wide circle of arms all around him, and it looks like a halo, so many arms. In the middle of each forearm and each hand, there is an eye, looking out. What it depicts is this archetype of being able to touch all the beings of the world, to see all beings of the world in this open stance, open heart, open mind, receiving all the suffering beings in the world. It's really very powerful to see that openness, with all those arms and eyes for every being, not turning away from any suffering being.

The male archetype is Avalokiteshvara, but Kuan Yin is the feminine archetype, the goddess of compassion. Sometimes it's said that Kuan Yin hears all the cries in the world. That open-hearted quality of not turning away. This is really a beautiful metaphor for us as we relax and open to the way things are.

True compassion is a natural expression of an awake mind—an awake mind and an open heart. It's one manifestation of this awake mind, which we could say expresses itself as love or loving-kindness, metta. This expression of love, in terms of compassion, is turned towards the suffering aspect of life. We turn the love towards that, this love that is open, this love that is able to be in contact with the way things are. The love is turned towards suffering, and with true compassion, there's also an impulse to want to relieve that suffering. In the contact comes the impulse or the wish, the desire to have that being be free of their pain, of their suffering.

When we feel true compassion, this is balanced with equanimity. It's this equanimity which allows a stillness in the mind, a non-reactiveness, which then gives us the capacity to sustain the contact with the

painful element—to sustain the contact without being repelled, without withdrawing, or without acting out and pushing away. This equanimity allows us to remain present even in the face of this difficulty.

Compassion can often be experienced as a relaxed openness, a softness, or a tenderness in the heart. Oftentimes we speak of the experience of compassion as a quivering in the heart, and I like that. We say that often because that sense of the quivering in the heart is so real, so true when we're in contact with it. We can actually feel the kind of vibration within the center of our heart as we open to compassion. It's really a very beautiful state of mind.

One of our teachers, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, talks about three aspects at the root of compassion that are all present together. He says these three aspects are sadness, a sense of responsibility, and joy. I think it's so interesting to reflect on these because you wouldn't think that true compassion would actually have either sadness or joy in it. It seems kind of incongruent to imagine that that can be the case. And also this sense of responsibility. So how do we understand this?

We feel the sadness, Tsoknyi says, because we realize that we can't end the suffering. In that knowing, in that recognition of the truth that no matter what I do, it's very unlikely that I'm going to be able to end the suffering, compassion has that wisdom, that understanding in it.

The responsibility that arises is that desire to reach forward. It's actually an energetic impulse to reach forward, to support or to help, to relieve the pain, even though we know that it's unlikely that we can.

And the joy—how interesting that there can be joy and sadness together. I think that the joy comes from the vitality that's present from being awake.

The joy and vitality that arise when we're in contact with things the way they are. A joy that emerges in presence itself when we are fully engaged with what's true. It is a joyful experience to be here fully with what is.

This is from an abbess at a Korean seminary for three hundred nuns, Myung Song Sunim, who speaks about compassion as great compassion. It's said in Korea that when one speaks of compassion, they always speak of great compassion. And she speaks of a compassion that is engaged, not distant—not when we're just sitting on a perch away from everything, kind of removed from life and simply feeling our heart full of compassion, but one where we're actually in touch with the way things are directly.

She says, "Great sadness means that when someone falls into a lot of suffering, we spend much energy to get them out of it. It also means that when sentient beings are sad, we are sad with them. When they cry, we also cry. Great love means that when sentient beings are happy, we are happy with them. Being sad together, being happy together—this is great compassion. Great love means that we give great happiness. Great sadness means that we deliver people from their suffering."

I really love that because it brings in the emotional heart, where we're actually feeling touched, feeling

moved. It's not a detached or cut off or distant kind of compassion, but we can be sad, we can cry, we can be engaged. The heart moves in many, many different ways.

I think it was mentioned that with sadness, it's easy to think that it shouldn't be here. Somehow that feeling of sorrow or sadness is supposed to go when we become more awake, when we become more free. But I think that sadness is actually a kind of moisturizer on the heart. It gives some juiciness to our practice. It keeps us awake, keeps us attentive, keeps us engaged.

Yet without understanding—really understanding the way things are with wisdom, that things are changing, that things are selfless, that things are ultimately unsatisfying—we can get lost in our sorrow and grief. We can get caught in our attachments to how we want things to be. There can be a caring, but without that deeper understanding, we remain caught in ordinary feelings, ordinary daily feelings. And this is really not true compassion, but an expression of some attachment.

When this isn't seen, we can be thrown into states of sorrow and grief, self-pity, even self-righteousness about what's happening. We can get paralyzed, frozen, unable to act in any kind of wise and responsive way. And these states, because they're so strong, can also cover up deeper feelings of helplessness—more vulnerable feelings of our helplessness, which can be hard to touch.

Yet this changes. Sometimes we're caught in these stronger states and sometimes we feel more freed up. It's not like we necessarily get stuck in one or the other. We can see that there are lots of changing mind states. Sometimes we can be more open and allowing. Other times our caring and concern can turn into holding on. This is very natural.

I was very touched by a story that Sharon Salzberg told once when she was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock. It just so happened that during that retreat, their friend—Joseph and Sharon's friend Ram Dass—came to visit. Ram Dass, as many of you may know, had a stroke some time ago that caused a great deal of paralysis in his body and some problems in his speech. It has been a very challenging, very difficult situation for him and his friends and his community.

So Ram Dass came in his van that's all geared up for him and his attendant, and they came and met Joseph and Sharon. Sharon tells the story that when Ram Dass was getting ready to leave—they had met in the council house, which you have to go up some steps and then come down some steps—when he had to go down these steps, he seemed to be in so much pain. He was really grimacing and making some moans and really having a hard time getting down. Finally he got down, and then he got in his van, and it seemed like such a lot of work and effort.

Sharon was just saying how her heart was in so much pain watching Ram Dass go through this very difficult and challenging way that he had to be in himself. So he got into his car, and Sharon went down and just said, "Oh, Ram Dass, I'm just so sorry. Are you okay?"

And Ram Dass looked at her and said, "Yeah, I'm okay. Are you okay?"

And in that moment, she really got how she had imagined—in a way that may not have been so accurate—what was actually going on for him. She was getting very contracted in how she wanted things to be for him. Yet when she asked him, he was absolutely fine.

It was simply the conditions he was dealing with at that time, but there didn't seem to be any way that he was caught in it.

I was so touched by that story—and also that Sharon would tell it. It's such a good example of how much we want things to be otherwise. But in this case, it wasn't even as she had imagined it to be. How often that can be true for us. We imagine when we see other people engaged in certain situations that things may be a certain way, when they may not be that way at all. So again, it's about taking a little more time, reflecting, sitting with what's actually happening. Are things really the way I imagine them to be?

This letting go. Our compassion manifests as we let go of our self-interests and our attachments to our desired outcomes. We can see how attached we get to the way we want things to be. We've spoken about this so much—this wanting things to be in our control, the way we want them to be. Carol was talking about this "me, me, me"—what does it mean to actually let go of this me? What about me? And yet as we loosen our grasping, as we loosen this fixation around the sense of ourselves, we begin to have more space. We feel more relaxed, a little more open to consider others, to be with others, to see others as they are—and also to hold ourselves with more kindness, with more care as we begin to let go.

Sogyal Rinpoche says, "After the concept of self dissolves, the expression of that realization is compassion." He's really pointing to what's there as we let go. That awake energy, that enlightened energy of being, is compassionate. As we let go, we're releasing a narrow view of the world, of ourselves, of others. And as we open, we gain a wider perspective, a more expansive view of the way things are.

Suzuki Roshi gave a teaching I once read on Kuan Yin, and perhaps it's a kind of koan, a spiritual question. Very simple. He just says: "Kuan Yin has a thousand hands. If we focus only on one hand, we lose 999 hands." What does this mean? I think it's really worth reflecting on.

For me, it means that if I focus only on one hand, it's the same thing as wanting things to be a certain way. Just wanting that one hand and all that it represents. I want something to be this way or that way, to see this, to feel that, to try to force something on myself or someone else. It's like putting myself in a box or someone else in a box—squeezing, pushing, manipulating. And when I do that, I lose 999 other hands. I lose all that possibility, all that's available in being able to respond with an open heart.

I'm not saying we have to always open to 999 possibilities or a thousand possibilities, because this may be too much for us. We may not be able to open in that way, and it can feel quite overwhelming if we try. But if we do feel that overwhelm, if we open in a way that so much is coming in and we feel overwhelmed, all we need to do—and this is what's so beautiful about this practice—is simply come back to being here right now. And even with that overwhelm, see if we can open our heart to that. That is the compassionate

response. That is the expression of the thousand arms, right toward that overwhelm. We don't have to be any particular way.

Many of you know that I spent many years in India. I was going to Bodh Gaya every year for about fifteen winters, teaching at the Thai temple near the Bodhi tree, where the Buddha was enlightened. I went the first time twenty years ago, and I really think this is where my heart first opened, where I truly started to come in contact with life in all its diversity and variety.

If you've been to India or know about India, it can be a real assault to the senses—and to all of our fixations and holdings and attachments. It was very, very difficult for me. There's so much impinging: colors and smells and heat and spicy food, all on one extreme or the other, such a wide variety of extremes. Bodh Gaya is in Bihar, one of the poorest states in India. There's so much poverty—beggar children, sickness, suffering. Lots of noise. We would sit at the Thai temple, and one year there was a carnival happening next door with music and commotion. At times there were loudspeakers going and all-night music, because they don't have many TVs, so they would just blast a loudspeaker for everybody to hear.

So the Hindi movie music would be going for hours and hours. It just seemed like there wasn't any way to get away from the impingement. There was so much to deal with.

The first year that I was teaching there, I was asked to do some questions and answers in the hall, and people wrote down their questions on pieces of paper. I naively thought that I could probably handle many of the questions that were coming in, but one question came in that really threw me. Of course, I didn't let anybody know that it threw me. But the question was: How do you deal with all this suffering? How do you deal? This was my first visit to India.

And the truth was, I had no idea. I had no idea. I couldn't say that at the time for some reason, but I wish I had, because that would have been the honest answer. I gave some kind of answer, and then later when Christopher, who I was teaching with, said something about how I did, he said, "You did really well with the questions, but that one question about suffering—you need a little work on that one. You're going to need to be in India a little bit longer to be able to answer that one."

It was really hard to allow myself not to know, because I had the sense that I should be able to open to all the suffering—the sense that it's possible to do that. And again, very naively and innocently thinking that could be the case. But I realized, this was twenty years ago, that I had no idea of the size of the cloth, no idea what I was actually even imagining that I could do.

Now I really understand that compassion can only open to the extent that I am free of the fixation of self—only to that extent. Because the fixation of self is actually what blocks the expression of that awakened energy as love, as compassion. I simply cannot express the caring nature as fully if I'm caught in all of my desires and attachments and hopes and wishes. It's not true compassion.

When we talk about letting go of the fixation of self, this points us to emptiness—to seeing the empty nature of self. Sukhni Rinpoche again says, "True compassion arises after the realization of emptiness." True compassion arises after the realization of emptiness. Another one of our dear colleagues, our monk friend Ajahn Amaro, says that emptiness is the fairy dust in compassion. Very playfully—emptiness is the fairy dust in compassion—which really opens up the heart to true compassion.

So what do we mean? How do we understand emptiness here? One doorway for the revelation of emptiness is seeing into the impermanent nature of things, as Joseph talked so beautifully about the other night. Seeing things that come into existence, stay for a while—a moment, a little while—and then disintegrate. This is what reveals to us a nature that is not fixed, that everything is in transition. Everything is empty of any substantiality. We say empty of self-existence—it cannot exist by itself. Everything coming and going, coming and going.

And it's this empty nature which is the openness that allows for things to be born, unfold, and pass away. There has to be an empty, open space in order for this creativity to manifest. Otherwise things would be locked, compacted, fixed—as we imagine the self to be. And yet when we look at the self, we can see how it's changing moment to moment to moment. Sometimes we see it more directly in a momentary way. Sometimes we see it through the day as our moods change, our emotions change, events change, light changes—dark, weather, cold, heat. We feel all these changes. We see all these changes. Things move because they are free. Things are already free.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, from *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*: "When sunlight falls on a crystal, lights of all colors of the rainbow appear, yet they have no substance that you can grasp. Likewise, all thoughts in their infinite variety—devotion, compassion, harmfulness, desire—are utterly without substance. There is no thought that is something other than emptiness. If you recognize the empty nature of thoughts at the very moment they arise, they will dissolve. Attachment and hatred will never be able to disturb the mind. No negative actions will be accumulated and no suffering will follow."

There may be moments that you experience when the sense of self is not so strong—different times through the day, or even times where there's a sense that it even fades away.

Or moments when there is no suffering. You're not experiencing the impingement or the contraction of the mind and the body. There's a sense that the self is not imposing itself so much on experience. There's a sense of more freedom, fluidity, flowing. The mind is more quiet, minding its own business.

These are tastes of momentary freedom. And these moments are very important to recognize because they really allow us to feel a deep connection with things. When the mind is quiet, when the heart is still, we can really be in touch with the subtlety of experience—even sometimes this moment-to-moment transient, changing experience. When we're not engaged in the usual distraction and identification, the desire and aversion and confusion in the mind, something starts to shift. And we might feel this sense of spaciousness, of calm, this feeling of metta, loving kindness, of true compassion, just for the way things

are.

We know this experience. Many people have had this experience. These moments are so important because they really reveal to us what's possible, our capacity as human beings. Sometimes it may be when you're walking outside or in the woods, at sunset or in the early mornings, and the mind opens, the heart opens. It might be when you're sitting in here, just these moments when you feel a sense that even when you touch the pain, it's okay. The heart feels so big. And in some ways you may even sense that it's not even your pain any longer, but that it's the pain of the world. It's the pain of being human in this body, in this world. You can almost have a sense of some impersonal nature to it.

And yet at other times we feel the constriction of the small self, the birth of me, me, me. When we're self-aware, when we're aware of this, we can feel the forces of greed, hatred, and confusion in the mind at play. And then it's easy to judge ourselves, to reject ourselves, and not be very compassionate. In these moments, we can think we have so far to go. The whole sense of past, present, future—all of time comes into play. "It's going to be forever before I'm free, before my heart opens." This kind of solidified view that we can start to have about the way things are, rather than even remembering that an hour ago, we were very quiet and still, and our heart was open and soft and moist. This view can come in and hijack the way things actually are.

This is from Chuang Tzu, and I read this early in my practice days. I've always loved this. It's called "The Empty Boat":

If a man is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his own skiff, even though he be a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees a man in the boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout is not heard, he will shout again and yet again and begin cursing, and all because there is somebody in the boat. Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting and he would not be angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of the world, no one will oppose you. No one will seek to harm you. Since he judges no one, no one judges him. Such is the free one. His boat is empty.

Yet all the great teachers say that emptiness itself is not enough—that we must also practice compassion. One time the Dalai Lama was asked, if we had a choice to put our efforts into deepening our practice of wisdom or practicing compassion, which one would he advise us to practice? And without thinking for very long at all, he said, "Compassion. Much more important to practice compassion. From there, the wisdom will awaken."

Because emptiness without compassion can actually feel brittle or dry. We can feel disconnected from the way things are. Since everything is empty, one can hold on to a view that nothing exists or that nothing ever happened. We have a friend who really loved to play with this view of nothing ever happened, nothing really exists. It's fun to play with that sometimes and just get into that dreamlike, insubstantial nature of things. And then he adopted a little girl, quite young. And it became something of a joke. We said, "So nothing ever happened? Nothing ever happened?" Because of course, when you have a little

baby, is nothing happening? The whole of everything breaks loose. Everything starts to explode.

So, you know, it just kind of flies in the face of that belief. Because even though everything is empty, beings do exist. Of course beings exist. And there is suffering—outer suffering, inner suffering. These conditions do not go away. Maybe things become more transparent or more insubstantial, but there is still pain. There's still the first noble truth: there is suffering in this world. No matter what, these conditions do not go away.

The true compassion that arises from the revelation of emptiness means that we have unlimited compassion for the infinity of beings in this world. That's what the revelation of emptiness points to—this capacity to meet the world as it is.

One teacher said that understanding the ultimate knowledge of the nature of things together with great compassion is the only way to truly eradicate suffering. Both the deep understanding of the nature of things and great compassion—this is the way we will eradicate suffering. And why is this? Why do we need both? Because then we aren't reacting to things out of our own egoic needs and desires and attachments. It comes back to the fixation of me, what I want, what I think is supposed to happen.

As we let go and allow our mind and our heart to open, our heart can be touched by the conditions of this world. Not only the painful ones, but also the pleasant ones, the beautiful ones. And as we allow ourselves to be touched in this way, we may begin to quietly wonder. These questions start to come into our mind. Why? Why are things the way they are? Why do beings suffer so? It doesn't make any sense. We can't understand it.

One time when I was in India, I had the opportunity of sitting with a young Indian man. Well, he was probably about seventeen—a boy, really. He was the son of the chaiwala who ran a shop outside our monastery, where we taught over the years. His name was Sanjay. He had been there since he was a little boy, and as the years went on, he grew up. Because a number of Westerners came around to the monastery and also had chai at his father's shop—a very tiny little shop—he was able to start learning English. It was really quite phenomenal that there was a way we could start to engage with him.

One day, after some years, I wanted to sit with him and ask him a few questions about his life. I asked him simple things, like what he ate for breakfast. He said he has a chapati—just a little wheat flour bread—and some tea, chai. If they're lucky, they'll get some milk for the tea. That's breakfast. And lunch? Rice. And maybe, if we're lucky, some curd, some yogurt, and some local vegetables. Dinner was tea again, with a chapati.

Hearing about the simplicity of his life, the realities of living in a poor village just behind the town, I remember sitting with him and feeling this sense of: why Sanjay and not me? How come I'm not Sanjay, living the same life? I felt so privileged. I felt so wealthy. I felt like I had so much in my life. And at the time, I really didn't have very much at all. I was mostly just traveling with a backpack, had no home, was

living very simply. But it was like: why?

Why? And it's like you can't answer those kinds of questions, and yet the heart wants to know. It goes very deep in the wonderings, in the reflection of how is it that things can be the way they are. And we don't know. And yet we can let our hearts be touched in the wondering. We can let our heart be touched in the not knowing, and something awakens for us.

And in some ways, we're not quite as afraid of the pain in the world. We can come more fully into our humanity and our shared humanity—that we share this together. We're not separate. We're not isolated beings. Everything we do affects everyone else. We start to feel this more deeply. And as much as we may want to resist and push that which is so difficult away, we see more and more that this is really the doorway to the wellspring of our love, the wellspring of our connection to others, to ourself, to life.

This is from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

As we open to the truth, compassion arises. Compassion means to suffer with—*com passio*, with passion. To be compassionate means we are capable of suffering. By being with suffering, one awakens.

Joanna Macy, this wonderful teacher and scholar, says that this is a tantric flip. She calls it the tantric flip—that when we turn towards suffering, the heart opens. Compassion opens. We don't want to. We don't want to turn towards the pain, but yet that is the doorway to the awakening. It's so counterintuitive. We want to resist it. We want to push it away. But it is through that doorway that the heart awakens. This tantric flip happens.

So we're encouraged to actually use the difficulties in our life, in our practice, to enhance our practice. And this is a heroic kind of practice. We might call it heroic compassion. Because we usually view the things in our life as obstacles or inconveniences to our practice when things aren't going the way we want them to go. And we can even disregard our practice. We can say, "I don't want to practice right now. I want to wait for times to be better. I want to feel better before I meditate or before I actually get more still or more quiet. Things are just too tough right now." And we can just postpone. Just keep postponing.

This is what the Dalai Lama says: "If you can't practice when you are suffering because of what it does to your mind, and you can't practice when you are happy because of attachment to your happiness, then there will never be a time when you can practice at all."

When can we practice if we're not actually seizing this moment the way it is?

Or we may find that we just don't want to deal with something. We just kind of want to deny or pretend that it isn't even going on. Just kind of skim over it completely. Cover over it.

This is a story that I really love. One of our friends tells this story. My friend's father was a young child driving with his own father in a car on December 7, 1941. A sudden announcement came over the car

radio: the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Immediately, the father leaned over and said urgently to his son, "Don't tell your mother." When my friend heard this story from his father, he thought, "Right, maybe he hoped she wouldn't notice any of World War II."

That's a bit of an extreme, but it's like that. Don't walk into that room. Just stay where you are. Things could get too difficult. But we take this on as a practice.

It's one way to practice. And we could hold it like this: I will not hold anything as my enemy. I will not hold anything as my enemy. It's very powerful when you reflect on it. Or: I will have an attitude of openness to all of life, even to that which is unpleasant. It's a kind of inclining the mind, turning the mind in this way towards this inclusiveness of our experience.

This is courageous. It's courageous practice. I think this is very courageous practice that we're doing. It takes tremendous courage to sit in the openness to the way things are, a deep willingness to face what's true.

This is from Hafiz:

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.
Let it cut more deep.
Let it ferment and season you
as few human or even divine ingredients can.
Something missing in my heart tonight
has made my eyes so soft,
my voice so tender,
my need of God absolutely clear.
Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.

It really points to that letting the heart be touched—in the tenderness, in the quivering. Such a beautiful place within our beings.

Someone asked the Dalai Lama if he gets angry at the Chinese. And he said, "Almost not." Isn't that wonderful? Almost not. And I think really what's being said there is that there are enemies, but we learn not to hold them as enemies. Because if we do, it corrupts our own hearts. It keeps us divided. It poisons us if we hold on to that. How can we release it? This is our practice.

Practicing compassion means that we practice acceptance. Practicing compassion means we practice equanimity—the mind that is free of reacting. We say, I accept this because it's happening. I may not like it, but it's happening. As Byron Katie, another wonderful teacher, says, reality is the highest order. We may want it to be very, very different, but what are we going to do?

So that question I was asked in the hall twenty years ago—how do I deal with all this suffering?—how

would I answer it today? When I reflect on it, I think one of the things that's very apparent to me is I see how many ideals and expectations and desires and wants I had then. And I see now that really what is being asked of me is just to start where I am, just to be here, just to be honest and truthful with just this right now. What is my capacity right now?

Because I see that really what this practice is teaching us is how to expand our capacity for openness, how to expand and deepen our wisdom, how to open our heart. And my sense more and more is that there are infinite possibilities for us as human beings, infinite capacities for what's possible for our heart and our mind.

I think it was Carol who once said, when I was on a three-month course, in one of her dharma talks: It's best to take a long view, have a long-range view, because so much is possible for us. We can't even begin to know.

I'll end with this poem, one of the Awakening Poems from Chokling Rinpoche, the brother of Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, another Tibetan lama. He says:

When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be,
spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me.
When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is,
I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter.
When watching, the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing
both disappear and cannot be found.
Now, what to do?

Let's sit for just a minute.

May I be a bridge and a ship for those who want to cross the water.
May I be an island for those who seek one and a lamp for those desiring light.
May I be a bed for all who wish to rest and a hand for those who need a help.

Thank you.

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