

First Turning

Part One: The Empty Self

1. Introduction

Please be aware that this discussion will be **audio-recorded** and placed on the OzZEN website **Study Guide** along with the text. Therefore, it is implied that you give your consent to be recorded if you participate in the discussion.

I will pause at the end of each paragraph for questions and/or comments, like we do in the reading group on Friday mornings. I prefer a more participatory style of interaction rather than a lecture followed by Q&A. If there are no questions and comments I will read the next paragraph and so on.

This course will be focusing on the progressive stages of insight into Emptiness.¹ Emptiness is probably the most important teaching of Buddhism. “Emptiness” is a translation of the Sanskrit, “sunya”.

Our story starts with the famous The First Turning of the Dharma Wheel Discourse (Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta), where the Buddha introduces us to the realisation of the pervasiveness of dukkha, the origins of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha and the path to be followed to the cessation of dukkha. This discourse was immediately followed by the Discourse on the Not-Self or Non-Self Characteristic (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta). As we will discover, this understanding of the “emptiness” of self is crucial to understanding the four truths, and the first level of insight into emptiness.

¹ Inspired by a book written by the Tibetan Buddhist monk, from the Karma Kagyu lineage, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche Gyamtso, K. T. (2016). Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness. Criccieth, Wales, Shrimala Trust.

2. Three Stages in the Process of Understanding

Meditation is the third stage in the development of understanding. The first stage is to listen to or study the teachings, with an open mind. The second stage is to reflect on the teachings in order to clarify their true significance. In the third stage the realisation takes place at the level of our being – not intellectual understanding, but experiential understanding. In a sense this is putting the teachings into practice. Practice in the sense of being the teachings rather than thinking about the teachings (Gyatso 2016). As friends together in the dharma we can share our understandings with each other, but ultimately we must all come to our own understanding and realisation – because there are different interpretations of what this understanding and realisation is – as the Buddha said in his final discourse – “be a light unto yourself”! Do not depend on others - What is it ultimately that you *can* depend on?

3. The Buddha’s Suffering

- a. The story of Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha – the awakened one.
- b. At first he was hesitant to teach.
- c. Then he taught for the rest of his life and died without home or family and without having written a word.
- d. The teachings were later written down and formed the suttas and the Vinaya, the monastic rules.
- e. Commentaries on the sutras followed later and became known as the Abhidharma (higher teachings). This was the beginning of Buddhist philosophy and later the treatises followed.
- f. What did he wake up to? (each turning of the wheel will have a different answer).

4. The Four Truths or The Four Practice Principles: First “Turning of the Dharma Wheel”)

In the first turning he awakens to the four truths, after inquiring into the nature of reality.² The “four” truths are not something you are required to believe, like a religious dogma, they are to be understood, practiced, and realised.

All schools of Buddhism have an allegiance to the four truths, though the precise interpretation of these commitments will differ. In the first turning the Buddha wakes up to the truth of dukkha (suffering). It is always here but according to the four truths it can also come to an end because it has a cause; hence, if we can free ourselves from the cause, we can free ourselves from dukkha.

- a. The truth of dukkha (suffering). What is this dukkha? It is more than pain:
 - i. Physical and Psychological Pain
 - ii. Change (Impermanence)
 - iii. Causal interdependence (Conditioning, as in karmic consciousness).

Dukkha is universal and all pervasive: “To be human is to live in dukkha” (Garfield 2015, 7-9). Even though the translation of dukkha as suffering, does not do it justice, from now on I will use the word suffering, rather than dukkha, but please bear in mind how all pervasive this suffering is.

- b. The origin of suffering.

Suffering is all pervasive because of ignorance or primal confusion about the true nature of reality: “This confusion, as the great 14th-15th century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa felicitously puts it, is not mere ignorance, but the positive superimposition of a characteristic on reality that it lacks” (Garfield 2015, 9). In the first turning, this is ignorance of the four truths. Because of this ignorance, *tanha* (desire) arises. Desire can take the form of attachment (greed) or aversion (hatred). Desire for existence or non-existence. The source of this desire is ignorance. The good news is, if we can transform ignorance into wisdom, then desire will not arise, it will be extinguished.

² The Four Practice Principles are a contemporary re-wording of the four truths.

So, the core problem is ignorance.³

So, suffering continues to arise because we consistently refuse to see reality the way it really is – it is always changing and there is no such thing as an independent *personal* self that does not change – it is empty of “intrinsic nature” - if there is a self – it is *interdependent* and always changing from moment to moment depending on context – hence if we have not awakened to the four truths, it is a process of ongoing suffering. As we will see below, *the kind of personal self that the Buddha is targeting here is the sense of a separate personal self that “owns” its thoughts and feelings and has some kind of independent agency and control over these thoughts and feelings.* This sense of having a separate personal self or ego-self, *feels* very real and because we consistently fail to see the nature of reality as it really is, as ongoing impermanence and conditioned interdependence, we suffer. One way of understanding “being caught in the self-centred dream” is the never-ending futile effort to control that which is uncontrollable. Suffering comes to an end when we stop imposing or taking our imaginary constructions of reality to be true.

In the first turning suffering is primarily explained by the notion of clinging to the five skandhas:

1. Material form (Pali, Skt. *rūpa*) consists of the physical elements (solidity, cohesion, heat, and air) that make up the body of a living being, and more subtle processes derived from these.
2. Feeling (Pali, Skt. *vedanā*) is the quality of experience that is hedonic tone, whether pleasant, painful, or neither. This is not the same as emotion, though it accompanies any emotion or sensory experience.

³ I do not have time to discuss the chain of dependent origination beginning with ignorance and the ideas of karma and rebirth.

3. Perception/Conception (Pali saññā] Skt. samjna) is associative knowledge as cognition, mental labelling, interpretation, recognition, how one sees things.
4. Mental Formations/Constructing activities (Pali saṅkhāras, Skt. saṃskāras) are a range of mental responses to objects, with will or volition (Pali, Skt. cetanā) being the leading one, others being planning, lines of thought, memories, emotions, habits and stories.
5. Dualistic or Dependent Consciousness (Pali viññāṇa, Skt. vijñāna) is discriminative consciousness, sensory discernment, awareness of sensory and mental objects, object-processing intelligence." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield).
Intentionality: the sense of being a "subject" in here looking at "objects" out there.

We identify with and mistake the skandhas for an independent personal self, but there is no independent personal self to be found. Mistaking the skandhas for a separate independent personal self is at the core of our ignorance and hence our suffering.

c. Cessation of suffering

Attachment, aversion, and ignorance are the fuel which keeps the fire of suffering burning – once the fuel supply ceases the suffering ceases – in the first turning Nirvana is simply the cessation or extinguishment of suffering. Remembering that suffering is another name for the activity of the separate personal self, we could say Nirvana is seeing clearly that an independent, separate, personal self or ego-self is an illusion. The illusion of the separate personal self *is* the process of suffering.

d. The path to the cessation of suffering

The good news is that the mind is not inherently ignorant, hence there is a path leading to the cessation of suffering by cultivating wisdom through the practice of philosophy and

meditation and expressing this wisdom through compassionate action in the world. The eightfold path is as follows:

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|---------------------------|--------------|
| i. Right View | (Wisdom) |
| ii. Right Intention | (Wisdom) |
| iii. Right Speech | (Action) |
| iv. Right Conduct | (Action) |
| v. Right Livelihood | (Action) |
| vi. Right Effort | (Meditation) |
| vii. Right Mindfulness | (Meditation) |
| viii. Right Concentration | (Meditation) |

Right View and Right Intention are Wisdom (Prajna): seeing the nature of reality. In one sense, right intention follows on from right view but it is also said that all factors are mutually reinforcing. The next three are Right Actions, which are the foundation of Buddhist ethics. The final three are the factors of Right Meditation: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

5. Emptiness of the Separate Personal Self (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta/Discourse on the Non-Self Characteristic”)

The first discourse of the Buddha focuses on suffering and the end of suffering, it mentions the five aggregates (skandhas) of clinging are suffering. This is then elaborated on in the second discourse of the Buddha on the Non-Self Characteristic. Another name for clinging is identification. It is through the process of identification with the skandhas that the illusion of self, arises and hence suffering arises. When this illusion is seen through identification drops away and suffering is extinguished – this in Pali Buddhism constitutes nirvana. Nirvana is clearly seeing that the skandhas are non-self.

In this second discourse then, we witness the *first stage of the progressive insight into emptiness* which focuses on the “not-self” or “non-self” characteristic of the skandhas. Non-self means that the skandhas are empty of self. However, importantly, this also implies the emptiness of the other. Pause. If we could really get this in our marrow, what a difference it would make!

The Empty Rowboat excerpted from *Everyday Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck.

Suppose we are out on a lake and it's a bit foggy - not too foggy, but a bit foggy - and we're rowing along in our little boat having a good time. And then, all of a sudden, coming out of the fog, there's this other rowboat and it's heading right at us. And... *Crash!*

Well, for a second we're really angry - what is that fool doing? I just painted my boat! And here he comes - *crash!* - right into it.

And then suddenly we notice that the rowboat is empty.

What happens to our anger? Well, the anger collapses... I'll just have to paint my boat again, that's all.

But if that rowboat that hit ours had another person in it, how would we react? You know what would happen!

Now, our encounters with life, with other people, with events, are like being bumped by an empty rowboat. But we don't experience it that way. We experience it as though there are people in that other rowboat and we're really getting clobbered by them...

In the Discourse on the Non-Self Characteristic, the Buddha defines the five skandhas as **non-self** because they cannot be controlled and they are impermanent. They are subject to illness, old age and ultimately death - therefore they are by definition dukkha – suffering – but here is the key – we suffer only if we *identify* with them. However, the pull to identify with our emotions and thoughts is so strong that the process of liberation is gradual and it is unlikely that we are ever completely free of some residues of identification. Also, and this is often misunderstood – dis-identification does not mean detachment – we still feel but we don't suffer – we still feel pain - however the feeling if you like is pure, it is not complicated by the stories and judgments that arise when we identify as self and other. And even when we do identify – for example “you” hurt “me” that diminishes in intensity and duration because we are now conscious and not

unconscious to the process of identification. So how do we practice non-self or non-identification?

In this discourse the Buddha advises that we should observe all the skandhas in the following way: any kind of form, feeling, perception, mental formation, or sense consciousness should be seen as they really are with the right wisdom, thus:

“this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”.

In other words, when we observe the skandhas with right wisdom, we see they are impermanent, interdependent, and discontinuous. Hence they are non-self, because the self as defined by the Buddha would be permanent, independent (non-relational) and continuous. In other words, the Buddha is saying don't take refuge in your skandhas. Another variation of practicing non-identification is to practice “thought labelling”. In thought labelling we say to ourselves, “having the thought, it was your fault/or my fault that this happened”. Thought labelling is a non-identification practice.

However, even if we practice with diligence, the *feeling* of having a sense of self continues to linger on – it still *feels* as if there is an *owner* of *our* thoughts, feelings and actions behind the thoughts, feelings, and actions. However, if we continue to persist in our practice, gradually we begin to see that there is no owner of our feelings and thoughts to be found. All we can see is impermanent, moment by moment flux. Just feelings and thoughts and once the sense of “me” drops out, the complicated feelings that arise on the basis of me and mine drop away. Pain is just pain. This then creates the space for non-self-centred feelings such as compassion (care), love and kindness to become more accessible.

So, in the text of this discourse on the “non-self” characteristics of the skandhas, the Buddha points to all five skandhas to show that they have **these three characteristics: conditioned interdependence, impermanence and suffering** - hence they are empty of self (non-self). When we see the skandhas are not “me”, we can ask, who then is suffering? We can also ask, who therefore is born and who therefore dies?

"Whenever anyone claimed any item, whether physical or mental, as "Self," the Buddha always critically examined the claim, to argue that the item is really an-atta (Pali, Skt. an-atman): not-Self, a non-Self, not a Self."

"Equivalent to saying something is "not-Self" is to say it is "empty" (Pali *suñña*, Skt. *Sunya*) of Self and what belongs to Self (S. IV.54)." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield)

In the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel, the ultimate cause or origin of suffering is ignorance or confusion over self-identity. Desire arises because we are conditioned to identify with the five skandhas. But when we do this we are doomed to always suffer. Whatever happiness we may experience is only temporary. However, when we see clearly, that the sense of "me" is created by identification – we see there is no "experiencer", of feelings, no "hearer" of sounds, no "thinker" of thoughts, and no "controller" of actions. We see how when we identify with the skandhas it creates the illusion of a separate self. If we follow the path – we see that suffering comes to an end when we cease the process of identification. If we do not identify with a thought, the thought has no power to generate suffering. The thought might arise, because of past conditions, "I am never good enough" but if we see clearly there is no "I" that the thought is referring to, then it just dissolves. It is the thought that creates the sense of I, there is no thinker of the thought.

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However, I want to pause at this point, and to suggest that the creation of a sense of a separate relational self is part of our evolution as a species. That identification with the skandhas was an important milestone in that it created the relational self and allows us to cooperate with each other, to carry out tasks to meet our basic needs. So, this illusion of a self was conducive to our survival as a species. Unfortunately, it also creates conflict over scarce resources because the relational self is embedded within an attachment and tribal framework. The relational self therefore has the capacity for empathy and collaboration (I-thou) but when things turn nasty it also has the

capacity to treat the other as an “it” (I-it). That is why the process of non-identification is now so important for our survival as a species. If we cannot transcend attachment and tribal-based identification we will be doomed to continuous warfare between tribes over competition for scarce resources.

The Pali Buddhist suttas teach that when we stop investing in the process of identification with the skandhas our conduct is also transformed – we are freed from being caught in the self-centred dream – therefore we stop *accumulating*⁴ karma leading to nibbana - the end of suffering – we are literally extinguished and hence are no longer reborn into the wheel of samsara, or, we experience peace of mind in this life.

Part Two: The Illusory Self

"Buddhism teaches that to understand suffering, its rise, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation is to see reality as it truly is."

Noa Ronkin, Theravada Metaphysics and Ontology quoted in "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield.

"I do not mean to imply that the separate self is non-existent. There is a difference between something that is non-existent, like a square circle, and something that is an illusion. An illusion does exist – it has a reality – but it is not what it seems to be" – Rupert Spira

6. Two different explanations for the illusion of self

Following the death of the Buddha over time different schools of Buddhism developed with different understandings of emptiness. In part two I will simplify this and discuss two competing perspectives on

⁴ There will still be residues of karma arising from the past, but not getting caught in these residues leads also to the extinguishment of historical karma.

the emptiness of self. The first perspective is known as the Abhidharma school, which develops a theory we will call the *reductionist* model. The second theory, following the work of Miri Albahari (Albahari 2006), we will call the *two-tier illusion of self* model.

The Buddha's teachings are often referred to as the middle way. Regarding the self it is sometimes said that he demonstrated that the sense of self we all experience was an illusion – that in fact the sense of self arises because we mistakenly identify with the skandhas – and because the skandhas are impermanent and interdependent there can be no such entity as a permanent autonomous personal self. The view that there was something like an eternal soul was called “Eternalism”. However, neither did he agree with the view called “Annihilationism” – the view that taught a person is totally destroyed at death. The Buddha therefore taught a “middle way” between these two polarities:

"The Buddha did not accept any of these views but saw unenlightened beings as subject to rebirth after death, according to the nature of their previous actions (karma). The link from one life to the next was a stream of conditioned and changing states: a “middle” way of understanding that avoided both eternalism and annihilationism (S. II.20)." (from *Theravada Philosophy of Mind and the Person* by Peter Harvey, from the book "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" (2016) by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield).

The main practical (soteriological) reason for teaching non-self was to free people from becoming attached to impermanent and interdependent phenomena which they mistook for being their self – so as to free them from unnecessary suffering:

“It is a contemplative strategy to induce, in the end, a letting go of *everything*” (Harvey, 2016).

In these teachings, even nibbana, the final goal of Pali Buddhism, while being seen as unconditioned and beyond impermanence and any suffering, was still understood as nonself.

The important point to remember is that when the Buddha's denies the existence of a self – he is denying what was one of the accepted

views of his day that there was a personal self or soul, that was totally autonomous from the body, permanent and eternal. He is not denying what we call the sense of being a self – a self that is changing from moment to moment which also flows on into future rebirths.

7. The Problem of Change and Continuity

Another way of understanding the problem of the illusion of self is how we understand the problem of *change and unity*, or of *discontinuity and continuity* – or how we stay the same while changing. We have all experienced sometimes looking in the mirror and noticing how we have aged yet still feel the same as when we did as a teenager. We have all experienced a sense of continuity of identity yet how can this be the case if we are changing from moment to moment? How we understand this problem of change and unity is relevant to both psychotherapy and Buddhism and our understanding of self-identity. And we can approach this problem from a diachronic perspective – movement through time – and from a synchronic perspective – the self as experienced in the present moment.

We will now explore two basic approaches to explaining the illusion of self, including how we explain the feeling of staying the same while changing. The first model is a reductionist model – reductionist in that it explains the illusion of a sense of being a unified self as an illusion that is generated by momentary atoms of experience that are bundled together and change rapidly from moment to moment. These basic elements are the only reality. They were regarded as the permanent constituents of reality and were called “dharmas”. The second approach, which I align with, I will call the two-tier illusion of self. This model explains the illusion of being a unified self on the basis that we all share a fundamental ground of being or consciousness which is ultimate reality.

8. Abhidharma

Following the Buddha’s enlightenment he began to teach. These teachings were recorded later in the suttas. The sutta’s became known as the first division or “basket” of the Buddhist Pali canon. The

second basket, the *Vinaya*, consists of the rules and regulations governing monastic life. The third and final basket, the collection of Abhidharma teachings (or higher teachings) are the beginnings of Buddhist philosophy. The suttas tend to be situational, intended for a particular audience on that particular day. There may appear to be inconsistencies or even contradiction. Therefore, the Abhidharma texts are an attempt to systemise and expand on these teachings.

In the Pali teachings, the most common way of dividing up the processes that constituted a person is in terms of the five khandhas (skandhas).

“Abhidharma metaphysics is based on the claim that only impartite entities – things with no parts – are ultimately real” (Siderits 2007, 105). The Abhidharma school explained how we experience the illusion of self by a reductionist model. In this philosophy, parts were real and wholes were not real. In this model the skandhas were reduced to unchanging independent self-existent elements. On this view, the skandhas were like flowing streams made up of moments/elements of reality (dharmas) at the physical and mental levels.

"The dhammas fall into four broad categories—consciousness (*citta*), mentalities (*cetasika*), materiality (*rūpa*), and nirvana—each of which is analyzed in great detail." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield).

For example, They would analyse a chariot to show that the name chariot only existed “conventionally” but ultimately was made up of smaller parts:

"The *Milindapañha*, a text dating from around the first century C.E., purports to be a series of conversations between a Bactrian-Greek king, Milinda (Menandros, reigned 155–130 B.C.E.), and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. Its key point is that “person,” or “being,” or indeed “self,” is not some mysterious essence, whether identical with any body part, or with the five aggregates individually or collectively, or something apart from these." (from "Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings" by William Edelglass, Jay Garfield).

The story of King Milinda and the monk Nagasena (Siderits 2007, 50-56).

Mereological reductionism – reduces the whole (the chariot) to its real constituent parts. By referring to all the different parts of the body and mind of a person or all the different parts of a chariot as not being the person or the chariot – Nagasena eventually demonstrates that nouns – the names we give to things – are simply convenient designations – mere conventions that serve a practical purpose. But they do not exist substantially.

“So when Milinda said he came in a chariot, what he said was true, he was referring to something real – just not a chariot. But why is this? Why not simply say that ‘chariot’ is the name of a chariot? The answer is that a chariot is actually not a real thing. The parts are real, but the whole that is made up of those parts is not. The whole can be reduced to the parts, it isn’t anything over and above the parts. This is the view known as ‘mereological reductionism’ (Siderits 2007).

Memories are also linked together to form an autobiographical narrative of a person who was born on a certain date and who dies on a certain day. But from this perspective, of course, the narrative lacks metaphysical reality and is no more real than a dream.

9. The Two-Tier Illusion of Self

An alternative interpretation of the illusion of self to the reductionist theory is presented by Miri Albahari in her book called “Analytic Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self” (Albahari 2006). This particular model was first articulated by an early school of Buddhism called the Mahasamghikas (The Great Sangha).

"The Mahāsaṃghikas accept a form of foundational consciousness (mūlavijñāna) that persists even through states of deep meditative concentration, a form of consciousness that is originally pure, though in its present state soiled by passions. It is distinct from the individual sense faculties and acts as their basis, as the root of the tree supports its branches. The resemblance with the conception of the ālayavijñāna that is going to play a key role in later Yogācāra is hard

to overlook." (from "The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy (The Oxford History of Philosophy)" by Jan Westerhoff).

Miri Albahari's work systematises this philosophical view. She begins by making a distinction between "self" and "sense of self". Belief in self, arises in two ways. The first is called the self-identity view – we mistake the skandhas as being the self, or being a property of the self, being in self or containing self. It is to view something as "this I am". Secondly, there is a more subtle level of the sense of self, we could describe as the sense being a personal witness – the sense of being a witness to our sensations, feelings, perceptions, and mental formations. She argues that this sense of self is real; (non-illusory) but the idea of the self as an owner of our thoughts, feelings and actions is not real (an illusion). The sense of self, which we mistakenly attribute to the illusion of being an owner of our thoughts, feelings and actions, is actually founded (not on atomistic parts) but on a universal consciousness that is reflexive – aware of itself being aware. It is this universal consciousness that is awake and aware of itself – not the person. Hence the phenomenon of the illusion of self is grounded in the ultimate reality of universal consciousness. We then mistakenly identify with the conventional sense of a being a person – the sense of telling an autobiographical narrative, because we are conditioned to experience the world from a subject – object duality viewpoint – which is superimposed upon our pristine nondual awareness which is primary. This awareness is nondual because the knower and the known are not two. Therefore, our sense of unity and continuity is real, because it is founded in this ultimate reality of nondual awareness.

10. Conclusion

The first turning of the dharma wheel focuses on the origin of suffering and the ending of suffering. Suffering arises because we are confused about the nature of reality and the primary confusion lies in how we mistakenly identify as a separate relational self. Moreover, it can be argued that this was an important evolutionary milestone that enabled our species to be the dominant species on the planet. However, we pay a heavy price – suffering and conflict between individuals, groups, and nations, all struggling to further their

own self-interest at the expense of others. The Buddha's teachings are pointing to the next evolutionary milestone – a universal altruism that transcends our tribalism. The Buddha contended that the essential key to this next step was to see clearly that our separate relational self is ultimately not real, even though it has been a necessary illusion. However, in order to transcend our separate relational self, we have to recognise the reality of our embodied interdependent existence. In the same way that we need to take care of the basic needs of our body we also need to attend to the basic needs of our relational self and at the same time realise that we are more than a separate relational self – to recognise we all share and participate in the foundational unity of the awareness of being.

11. Discussion or Take-Home Practice: Meditations on the Emptiness of Self

The four truths are not a dogma to be believed but practice principles to be experientially realised or understood:

- a. How does the philosophy of Non-Self, guide your practice of meditation? How does the practice of meditation inform the philosophy of Non-Self?
- b. Meditate on the following regarding all the five skandhas: “this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”.
- c. Practice thought-labelling for 5-10 minutes each time you meditate or even during your everyday life.
- d. During your everyday life, when you have a opportunity to sit and do nothing – sit and do nothing. For example, you might be in a waiting room waiting for an appointment or you might be flying in a airplane. When you sit and do nothing what do you notice?

- e. Given the emptiness of Self, and therefore the emptiness of Others, what ultimately can we rely upon?

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