

Gratitude to the Buddha: The Case Study of Buddhamahametta Foundation

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the virtue of gratitude towards the Buddha among meditation practitioners at the Buddhamahametta Foundation. The study employed a qualitative research approach, and involved 10 key informants who had a minimum of three years of experience in mindfulness-based practice at the Foundation. The informants were selected from a diverse range of professional backgrounds, including hospitality, real estate, marketing, and commodity products. The In-depth interviews were conducted with each informant and it was recorded. A narrative approach was used to contextualize their explanations. The information collected from the interviews was analyzed and summarised into key issues. All key informants signed the consent form to provide their information publicly.

The study found that expressing gratitude towards the Buddha has a positive impact on the behaviour and psychological well-being. Specifically, the informants reported that they can let go any suffering easier, be less upset and angry, be more diligent, and no longer blame others. Furthermore, the appreciation of the Buddha was associated with their greater happiness and a heightened awareness of the value of life. After the study was conducted, there is beneficial to further study for example, the Buddhamahametta Foundation could consider incorporating concepts of gratitude towards the Buddha into their self-improvement programs, including in mindfulness-based course.

Keywords: Behaviour, Buddha, Gratitude, Meditation Practitioners, Psychology

Introduction

The observed increase in the interest of mindfulness reflects people concern to improve their quality of life these days (Cagri et al., 2020). The study from Jiwattanasuk (2021) mention mindfulness-base program could develop physical, psychological, behavioural, and intellectual well-beings. Also, substantial evidence suggests that mindfulness exercises can contribute to the promotion of both physical and mental health. (L'Abate, 2010). Mindfulness exercise would also reduce the anxiety and depression (Morais et al., 2022). The cultivation of mindfulness course includes the variety programs

such as walking mindful, sitting mindful, sleeping mindful, eating mindful, and bowing mindful.

The paper examines the case of Buddhamahametta Foundation. The Foundation was established on April 7, 2015, at Chiang Rak Noi, Ayutthaya, by Phrakruwinaiithorn Kittiched Siriwattago, Ph.D. The foundation operates as a non-profit entity and is a mindfulness-based center for all denominations of Buddhist practitioners. The foundation aims to encourage Buddhist practice and mindfulness-based activities among practitioners. It organized its first mindfulness-based course on Vesak Day, May 29, 2018, which was attended by 666 practitioners. The course was well-received, leading to the organization of additional courses between August and December of the same year. As of March 2020, the number of mindfulness-based practitioners had reached 12,388, but courses were put on hold due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, as the pandemic situation improved, the number of mindfulness-based practitioners had reached around 6,000.

The way to practice in Buddhamahametta Foundation includes both mindfulness-based practice and the recollection of the Buddha. With the path of this practice, it enhances practitioners' happiness. The practice enables practitioners to gain insight into the path and fruition in their lives. Apart from this, according to the book called Vimuttimagga (1961), when practice the recollection of the Buddha, it should be with both faith and understanding. The practice of recollection of the Buddha at the Buddhamahametta Foundation involves a technique that includes the physical act of bowing mindfully. Bowing is a physical expression of the Buddha's teaching. This technique is simple to practice and offers the virtue of gratitude towards the Buddha. Practicing this technique has been found to have a positive impact on both psychological and physical well-being, with gratitude intervention having the potential to influence health behaviour outcomes as well.

The practice of recollection of the Buddha generates a sense of appreciation and promotes the pursuit of gratitude. The Maslow's study (1954) identifies self-actualization, the highest level of his model of human motivation, as the driving force behind the realization of one's true potential and the attainment of their 'ideal self'. The study further highlights that self-actualized individuals tend to exhibit psychological well-being, and have the virtue of gratitude.

Maslow's (1954) research on self-actualization and psychological health highlights the potential correlation between the two. Mahatthanadull's (2019) study supports this notion, suggesting that self-actualization can lead to positive intellectual well-being, while the virtue of gratitude can further promote intellectual well-being as well.

Hence, the objective of this paper is to examine the practice of gratitude towards the Buddha among meditation practitioners, with a particular focus on those affiliated with

the Buddhamahametta Foundation. This study is related to the pursuit of gratitude, with several research also demonstrating its positive impact on mental health and overall well-being, including reducing the level of ego.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study, which involves 10 key participants who are practitioners from variety sectors such as healthcare, education, hospitality, and so on. Details are described as follows:

Key Informants

Practitioners were recruited from adult participants who have attended the mindfulness course at Buddhamahametta Foundation and identified themselves as "Thai". The target group must have experience and participate in mindfulness-based course in the Foundation at least 3 years. This study was collected the data directly from the target group which was the group of 10 practitioners.

Research Instruments

The study utilized in-depth interviews, with each interview being conducted individually. As part of this process, all interviews were audio recorded.

Data collection

This study adopted a narrative approach, aimed at facilitating the respondents to express their experiences in their own words and provide more context for their explanations. This method was preferred over the use of narrowly focused or closed questions to elicit a greater quantity of information from the participants. The narrative approach has been shown to encourage participants to response more and in details. The key questions are as follow:

1. How do you feel after the practice of bowing mindful?
2. In the daily life, how often do you practice the recollection of the Buddha? How do you feel after practicing?
3. Could you please compare your behaviour and psychological well-being before and after the practices of bowing mindful and the recollection of the Buddha?

Data Analysis

Subsequent to the interviews, the data was collected and categorized into the benefits from gratitude to the Buddha of each key informants. Thereafter, the summary of those effects could be beneficial to further study, such as the development of a mindfulness-based course in conjunction with Buddha Appreciation, that promotes positive behaviour change and enhances psychological well-being.

Results

It is apparent that the gratitude to the Buddha has a positive impact on the behaviour and overall well-being of practitioners. This is evidenced by the observed changes in the lives of practitioners and the positive feedback received from those around them. Hence, it can be concluded that the practice of gratitude to the Buddha has the ability to enhance the psychological well-being of individuals.

As mentioned earlier, research methodology is the qualitative method. Key informants were interviewed individually.

Transcripts of all key informants could be summarized as follows:

Key Informant 1:

She/He works as a public relations manager at a hospital and has been practice for six full years. Having the opportunity to practice dhamma by slowly bowing and prostrating to the Buddha, she/he felt her/his mind shaking. At that time, she/he was not aware that it was the result of joy (from dhamma) and gratefulness. She/he also had goosebumps. When the master taught her/him how to bow slowly, she/he felt tears running down her/his face. At the time she/he had no idea why tears were falling down her/his face as it was the first time. However, after that she/he has followed the master's slow-bowing and prostrating technique while listening to the "homage to the Buddha" song. She/He felt deeply connected to the lyrics. Moreover, she/he feels respect, appreciation, and love toward the Buddha.

When she/he is outside working in the hospital, there are a lot of things that bother her/his mind. Because she/he is surrounded by sick people as well as dying patients. The fact that she/he works at a hospital, she/he experiences a lot of suffering. She/He is able to apply the slow-bowing and prostrate technique the master has taught whenever something troubles her/his mind. Sometimes there are complaints/quarrels between doctors, nurses, patients, and patients' relatives. When encountering extreme anxiety, she/he sometimes needs to resort to bowing slowly to the Buddha which helps a lot. After bowing 3 times, her/his mind is able to let go easier. There is no point in being miserable. She/He realized that everything arises, sustains, and ceases to exist. Everything appears and disappears, so why does she/he need to suffer and be miserable about it? It helps when suffering arises in the mind, and she/he can let it go faster compared to the past. Now she/he can let go of suffering faster and faster.

Key Informant 2:

She/He is 43 years old and is a housewife. She/He has been practicing with the foundation for about 8 years. When prostrating to the Buddha, she/he feels the love for the Buddha. She/He feels her/his mind is gentle and delicate as if she/he is prostrating right at the Buddha's feet. She/He has a lot of love and respect towards the Buddha and

understands that the Buddha is the noble one. She/He is grateful as if her/his heart wants to be with the Buddha and doesn't want to be reborn again. She/He feels her mind is cleaner and purer and wants to dedicate her/his life and mind to the Buddha. She/He has a great love for the Buddha and realizes that everything the Buddha has done for every living being is the noblest act; the Buddha sacrificed, had high will power and really wanted everyone to be free from suffering. Thus, when she/he gets through problems and obstacles, she/he feels grateful and thankful that the Buddha had high will power and sacrificed for us, sentient beings, to be free from suffering. This is how she/he feels. The mind is calm, humble, respects and loves the Buddha. It's very easy. Having a clean mind, happiness can be achieved faster.

Key Informant 3:

She/He is a pensioner who is 70 years old and has been coming to the foundation for 8 years. Slowly prostrating the Buddha with a song, such as "Homage to the Buddha" song, allows her/him to adhere her/his mind to the song. Having the Master leads the prayer before paying homage each time makes her/him feel like she/he has really bowed down to the feet of the Buddha. She/He feels happy every time she/he prostrates to the Buddha. It is the feeling of gratefulness. During the day, she/he would continue to recite "Buddho-Buddho" which allows her/him to attain peace of mind and able to let go easier. She/He feels that she/he has more consciousness, kindness, gratitude, and love for the Buddha. Now she/he is happier and kinder and her/his mind smiles all the time.

Key Informant 4:

She/He is 55 years old and has his/her own business in financial investment. She/He has been practicing dhamma at Buddhamahametta Foundation for about 3 years. Which makes her/him found a path to be happy for the rest of her/his life.

She/He used to be a person who always think negatively and experienced a lot of suffering. But her/his life has changed and she/he has become a more positive person. Whatever suffering she/he is facing, she/he can handle it in a short time. Unlike before when she/he needed many days to handle it. Now she/he can resolve it within hours or even minutes. Prostrating to the Buddha makes her/him feel grateful to the Buddha which makes her/his mind changed. People around her/him said that in the past she/he was angry and frustrated. But now she/he is more mindful and is able to let go of emotions quickly. She/He has really changed.

Key Informant 5:

She/He is 59 years old and has been practicing dhamma at the foundation for 5 years. Slowly bowing down and prostrating the Buddha is the core of the practice. Slowly prostrating allows her/him to be mindful of every movement. The slower the movement, the more detail will be detected by the mind. The mind will not be distracted elsewhere

while she/he practices watching body movement. It is a practice in which the mind will not wander from the body at all. Therefore, it is very effective. This practice feels as if she/he is really with the Buddha and the level of concentration is very substantial. During the time of prostration, there would be no distraction for the mind to wander anywhere. And after prostrating to the Buddha, it seems like the mind can concentrate very well. Thus, when she/he applies it in her/his daily life, she/he has more determination, which results in better work quality. She/He is happier and more mindful as if bad things had been washed away and she/he can be happy.

Key Informant 6:

She/He is 56 years old and works at a state enterprise. She/He has been practicing dhamma for 5 years. Paying homage to the Buddha makes her/him feel like she/he is really bowing down to the feet of the Buddha. This act makes her/his mind happy, and she/he is also happier at work, calmer. Her/his mind is more positive, kind, understands everyone, and wants everyone to be happy. She/He is happier and able to live with suffering better. A person's life is filled with suffering whether it is a lot or a little, but it is normal. Thus, there is no need to be overwhelmed the feeling of suffering. She/he is grateful. Moreover, her/his bad habits gradually disappear. No matter where she/he is, she/he can always practice dhamma.

Key Informant 7:

She/He is a special instructor teaching English at a private university and is studying Ph.D. in Buddhism. She/He is currently doing research on Buddhism and has been practicing dhamma at the foundation for about 5 years. Prostrating to the buddha makes her/him feel grateful toward the Buddha. It makes the mind humble, modest and feels more love for the Buddha. After prostrating to the Buddha, she/he felt that the mind is softer, gentler, and purer. When she/he feels bad, she/he would intend to pay respect to the Buddha. She/He feels that the action can purify the mind and allows her/him to acknowledge the divine and noble, which is a great feeling. Paying homage to the Buddha takes only a short time, but it makes her/him connect with herself/himself and becomes mindful. If she/he consistently think of the Buddha, no matter what she/he is doing, she/he will not dare to do anything bad.

Being grateful to and always thinking of the Buddha can be done anywhere. Even while she/he eats, she/he also tries to practice it. Her/His mind has changed a lot because normally she/he is stressed out quite easily. Being a person who does anything with full attention and seriousness causes stress, but now her/his mind is relaxed and gentle. Her/his mind is better and doesn't dare to do bad things. She/He now has a lot of love for the Buddha. It is like loving the Buddha more and more every day and it is the purest and noblest act.

Key Informant 8:

She/He is 28 years old and works in a private company. She/he has been practicing at Buddhamahametta Foundation for about 8-9 years now. Prostrating to the Buddha makes her/him more conscious and more mindful. Before bowing down to the Buddha, she/he is fully aware of the body, and when prostrating and she/he would think of the Buddha situated in front of her/him. This makes her/him feel grateful more easily and filled with gratitude. She/he has changed a lot. Especially while living in the real world, she/he will look at people with more kindness. Moreover, when having problems with others while working, she/he experiences this feeling of wanting to let it go and try not to turn it into stress. It is like she/he is trying to understand why others think how they think and then practices kindness toward them. This allows everything to end well and there will not be any problems between each other. She/he feels calmer. It makes her/him aware of the emotions. When she/he is angry, she/he feels the presence of anger, acknowledges it, and then gradually the feeling disappears. Or when she/he talks to other people, she/he has more kindness toward others. She/He doesn't let any feelings or anything become stressful in her/his life.

Key Informant 9:

She/He lives in Australia and is an employee of a company. She/He has been practicing dhamma at Buddhamahametta Foundation for 5 years. While prostrating she/he would think of the Buddha's feet and every time she/he bows, she/he will be grateful. During working hours, she/he would be able to think of the Buddha consistently and tries to make it her/his habit. Her/His habit has changed a lot, in the sense that she/he has become more mindful. Thus, bad habits such as being self-centered have lessened. She/He will continue to practice dhamma in her/his daily life whether at work or while traveling.

Key Informant 10:

She/He is currently running her/his own business in real estate and has been practicing dhamma for about 6 years now. When seeing the Master bow to the Buddha, she/he felt that she/he hadn't totally understood at first, but it made she/he felt that she/he wanted to pray and practice dhamma more. That was the turning point. She/He feels that bowing and prostrating slowly to the Buddha is not just a physical practice. The important thing is that when she/he prostrates to the Buddha, her/his mind becomes lighter, cleaner, and purer. This act cleanses the mind very well. The Master teaches her/him to always think of the Buddha. She/He feels that following what the Master has taught makes her/him feels that mind is better. She/He has become kinder, gentler, and softer, which she/he can't do by herself/himself, because normally she/he is a hot-tempered person and often does something without thoroughly contemplating the

outcome first. But when she/he follows the Master's teaching, she/he feels calmer and becomes more considerate about others and puts others before herself/himself.

There were occasions when she/he worked and felt miserable, facing numerous challenges that were sometimes hard to overcome. However, when she/he thinks of the Buddha, the accumulated sorrows suddenly disappear. Personally, whenever people are open-minded, she/he believes that dhamma can fully flow into the mind. Her/His mind has changed a lot. It is like her/his old bad habit was changed. Her/His attitude toward the world has also changed. An obvious example is that in the past she/he will be the one who blames others and questioned others why they acted how they were acting and not do otherwise. She/He mainly looked at others from her/his own perspective, but after being trained to be grateful to the Buddha, she/he had changed. Instead of looking at others with her/his own thoughts; instead, she/he has a more understanding views of others. She/He looks at others with more understanding. She/He refrains from blaming others and from expectations better. She/He looks at others with understanding and kindness.

From the research outcome, amidst the surge in interest according to mindfulness, one line of the research concentrates on understanding possible mechanisms through which the effects of mindfulness exercises result in the virtue of gratitude. Those mindfulness programs include bowing to the Buddha and recollection of the Buddha in the daily life. These practices reflect the appreciation to the Buddha. Such virtues of the gratitude can be summarized into 8 points as below.

1) Stress reduction: Many people easily become stressed while working. Thinking of the Buddha during the day makes them feel calm and more mindful. It helps them to become less stressed than before.

2) Letting go of thoughts: Previously, they couldn't let go of their thoughts and had too many thoughts. But after appreciating and placing a mind with the Buddha, they can let go of their thoughts more easily.

3) Positive thought: Previously, they had a negative outlook on life and liked to blame others. After appreciating the Buddha, they feel that their habits have changed. They blame others less and only think positively.

4) Sympathy for others: They feel empathetic towards others and take others' feelings into consideration and understand everyone.

5) Pursuit of happiness: They are happier. Many practice the recollection of the Buddha during the day. This helps them to have a good and peaceful mind, and can easily be happy.

6) No suffering: They can let go of their suffering. Even though they are amidst suffering, they don't suffer.

7) Improvement in mindfulness: Practicing bowing mindfully helps them to be more mindful. Furthermore, they recite Bud-dho or practice recollection of the Buddha during the day, it promotes to have more mindfulness in their daily life.

8) No ego: From practicing bowing mindfully or recollection of the Buddha, they feel appreciative to the Buddha and realize that their sense of self has lessen.

The virtues of gratitude to the Buddha could illustrate as below:

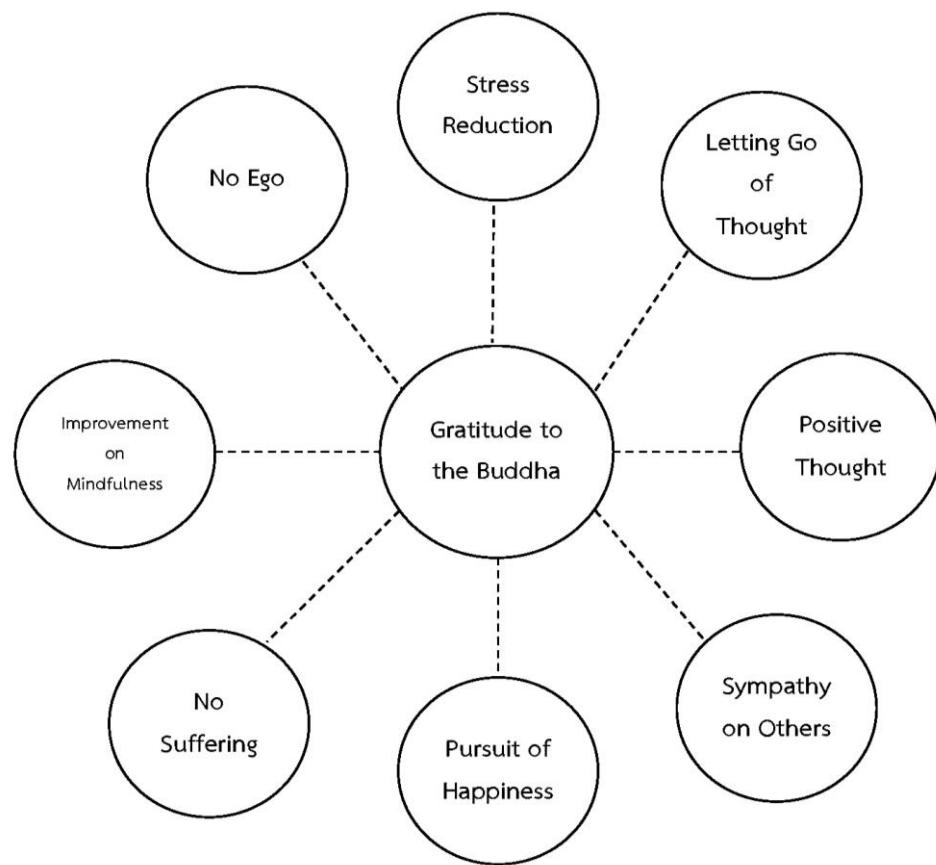


Figure 2: The diagram to illustrate the virtues of gratitude to the Buddha

Discussions

According to the research result, it was found that gratitude of the Buddha brings the reduction in stress, letting go of thoughts, positive thinking, sympathy on others, the pursuit of happiness, no suffering, and the improvement on mindfulness. These outcomes achieve the aim of this paper to study the venues of gratitude to the Buddha. The results represent the progressive behaviour change and positive psychological well-beings. The common issues among practitioners from the in-depth interview can be described as follows:

1. Increased gratitude is a common result of mindfulness-based program especially by bowing slowing. All key informants mentioned that slow bowing mindful results in the

gratitude to the Buddha. Gratitude is associated with a host of mental benefit. This is in line with the Zixi's study (2023), there is a significant connection between gratitude and well-being, as expressing gratitude has positive emotional effects on both the individuals who receive it and those who give it. Gratitude is associated with positive emotions such as happiness, pride, hope, contentment, optimism, and vitality. Furthermore, Philip et al.'s (2022) study also highlighted the importance of gratitude in improving one's life. Gratitude is essential to the persons and circumstances necessary to build one's happiness. Moreover, many key informants mentioned that gratitude interventions could reduce stress. This could also improve their work performance. This is in line with the study from Meyer & Stutts (2023). It was found that people who had high level of gratitude are able to have the lower level of stress.

2. The recollection of the Buddha in daily life is generally accepted views exercise as beneficial to develop the improvement in mindfulness. Such statement was mentioned from many key informants. One of them reported practicing recollection of the Buddha during the day and experiencing an increase in mindfulness. This informant also mentioned that she gained the gratitude and have more mindfulness. This event is in line with the study from Rodgers (2020). The results of the study support the correlation between mindfulness and gratitude. For instance, when individuals cultivate gratitude and have more mindfulness, mindfulness can support individuals in managing negative thoughts and developing a greater awareness of their positive attributes. They can easily let go of their thoughts and emotions. For example, when practitioners recollect of the Buddha, they would feel the virtues of gratitude and mindfulness. As a result, they can let go of negative emotions such as anger more easily. This is in line with the study from Bhatnagar (2011). The study states that mindfulness could be associated with the letting go of thought. In other word, if practitioners are in the pursuit of gratitude resulting in the improvement of mindfulness. This could help them letting go of thought easily.

3. The recollection of the Buddha improves the better behaviour of the practitioners. Before practicing, most key informants always had a negative thought with other. After they are in the virtue of gratitude to the Buddha, they become more optimism and sympathy on others. This is in line with the study from Ferhat et al. (2019). The study stated that the pursuit of gratitude is associated with the optimism. The study from Buck (2004) also mentioned that the gratitude may extend to other people who may not in a loving relationship. This involves with the feeling of empathy and sympathy to other.

Most importantly, that study from Buck (2004) also stated that gratitude involves an implicit exchange between the giver and the receiver, resulting in a moral communication process. As per the in-depth interviews conducted with key informants, when practitioners are in the virtue of gratitude to the Buddha, they always experience an

increased sense of loving-kindness, positive thinking, and empathy towards others. These evidences support the above study from Buck, which suggests that gratitude can help developing the moral emotions.

4. The slow, mindful bowing and recollection of the Buddha is associated with the gratitude benefits. Bowing is a physical expression of reverence towards the Buddha that entails letting go of one's ego. This view was confirmed by most of the key informants, and is supported by Wang et al.'s (2020) study, which found that expressing gratitude can lead to ego depletion. The study surveyed 276 employees and found that when leaders expressed gratitude at work, employees also showed signs of ego depletion as well.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Implementing the Research Results

From the research results, it is recommended the following institutions to apply as follows:

1. Buddhamahametta Foundation –After the study, this paper indicates that gratitude towards the Buddha has improving the behaviour and overall well-being of the practitioners. These findings affirm the recommendation to incorporate mindfulness-based practices, such as mindful bowing and recollection of the Buddha, in order to attain the benefits of gratitude.

2. Buddhism Teaching Program – From the result of the study, mindful bowing and the recollection to the Buddha is associated to the gratitude benefits. It is recommended that the practice of mindful bowing and the recollection to the Buddha could be incorporated in the school curriculum nationally starting from primary school to university.

3. Other mindfulness-based practice retreat – As per research findings, apart from Buddhamahametta foundations, the other meditation centers can include the concept of gratitude to the Buddha together with the mindfulness-based course. This not only increases awareness but also promotes behavioural change and psychological well-being.

Recommendations for Further Research

From the research, there are a few points that will be further researched in the future as follows:

1. A potential area for further study is the assessment of the impact of gratitude to the Buddha. This could be achieved through the use of a questionnaire that practitioners could complete to provide valuable feedback.

2. Further study involves exploring cultivation of other mindfulness-based practice. Apart from mindful bowing to the Buddha and recollection of the Buddha, other mindful practice that is part of our daily activities such as mindful eating and mindful sleeping.

3. Further study on the self-improvement program: After the research, gratitude to the Buddha leads to the change in behavioural. It is recommended to integrate this virtue in the self-improvement programs, as the findings suggest that this practice can lead to positive changes in behaviour and psychological well-being.

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