

**Engaging Zenamatography:
*Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?***

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Produced over a period of eight years by Korean director Bae Yong-kyun, the film *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (Korean release 1989; USA release 1993) demands almost as much time and energy from its audience as it did from its creator (Bae Yong-kyun wrote, produced, directed and edited the film). The two-hour film attempts in many ways to be an interactive experience. Unbalancing the audience with its defiance of the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, the film uses unusual plot elements to force the audience into an interpretive mode, then bombards them with Zen allusions and context, which raise questions about the tradition itself. However difficult these methods make the film for viewers without a strong background in Zen, this indirect approach of demanding an emotional response, then leaving it up to the viewer to grapple with the Zen context and final meaning of the film, is certainly a more ambitious tactic in dealing with Zen in film than other, more documentary approaches.

By putting the responsibility of finding meaning on the audience, Bae Yong-kyun forces them to explore Zen on their own terms, which is quite possibly his goal. In a Milestone Video press release about the film, the director is quoted as saying: “The central interest of this work is absolutely not Zen in and of itself — in effect, Zen...in this film [is] an environment...I chose this setting because...[it] is perfectly suited to express my search for life’s meaning” (Milestone paragraph 15). In searching for the meaning of the film, one must come to some understanding of the Zen tradition that serves as its background, a

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tradition fundamentally concerned with the “search for life’s meaning.” (Admittedly, most religious traditions are.) Zen asks hard questions about the nature of human life and existence. By forcing the audience to explore this tradition in order to make sense of the film, the film in turn places the burden on Zen to challenge the audience’s personal beliefs.

Any discussion of the film and its goals would be difficult without a shared understanding of its narrative events. However, describing the plot of *Bodhidharma* is difficult because the emphasis of the film is not on the action or timeline; the film’s long breaks and flashbacks can easily confuse the viewer. Although different reviewers of the film have identified some plot elements differently, a generally accepted version of the physical story line may be outlined as follows. A young man named Yong Nan is troubled by the death of his father and leaves his blind, widowed mother to enter a Buddhist temple. The abbot of this main temple then sends him to a mountain hermitage to help an aging monk in poor health, Hyegok. Also living with Hyegok in the mountain hermitage is a young orphan boy named Haejin, whom Hyegok adopted while seeking medical treatment in the city.

The three men, Yong-Nan (now renamed Kibong), Hyegok and Haejin live together in the mountain hermitage, where the elder monk Hyegok instructs the younger two in Zen. While Hyegok uses koans (described as riddles) to teach Kibong, the younger Haejin experiences and comes to understand life and physical death with relatively little formal instruction. While in the woods, Haejin throws a rock at a jay, wounding it. Although he nurses it, attempting to save it, the jay later dies. Its body’s subsequent decomposition is Haejin’s first encounter with physical impermanence and forces him to come to terms with it for the first time. Throughout the rest of the film, the jay’s mate follows Haejin, often upsetting him and once causing him to fall into a river, which carries him far enough from the hermitage that he becomes lost. He finds his way home by following an ox that had escaped its pen earlier in the film, in a dramatic scene of symbolic significance.

Meanwhile, Kibong struggles with his guilt over abandoning his mother. Flashbacks show scenes of his mother’s suffering as well as a discussion with a fellow disciple who decides to leave the temple and

return to “the world” of contemporary Korean urban society. The scene with the fellow disciple seems to mark the height of Kibong’s anxiety over his decision to leave his mother. Kibong questions Hyegok about the value of renunciation and arranges to return to the city to beg for money to buy his master medicine, as Hyegok becomes increasingly weaker and closer to death. There in the city, while chanting, he finds some connection with Zen. His luck turns as people start to put money in his begging bowl, so that he is then able to buy the medicine. But before Kibong leaves the city, he returns to visit the slum where he grew up. There he confronts the suffering of his widowed mother. Although Kibong is torn with pity for her, and guilty as she searches blindly along the floor for her medicine, he watches her in silence, moving to touch her or announce himself, but ultimately holding back.

After his return to the hermitage, Kibong throws himself into the same type of extreme asceticism that destroyed his master’s health. (This extreme asceticism is reminiscent of the ascetic practices rejected by Siddhartha in favor of the “Middle Way” of Buddhism.) While meditating under a waterfall, he passes out, forcing Hyegok to save him. This causes the frail man’s health to deteriorate further, and he soon dies. Following Hyegok’s final instructions, Kibong carries the body into the woods and cremates it, then spreads the ashes. When he returns to the hermitage, he gives the orphan Haejin the remains of his master’s belongings and leaves. Haejin burns the bundle of possessions, after which the jay that had tormented him flies away. The film ends with a shot of Kibong walking into the sunset, leading an ox through the valley that first led him to the hermitage and away from the world. Because he is walking through this valley, it appears that he is returning to the world, but in what capacity is unclear. The valley leads to the city temple that he first entered; it leads also to the slum where he grew up and the shack where his mother lives. However, it also leads back to civilization in general, and Kibong could be following in the spirit of the ox-herding sequence, which ends with a drawing of the enlightened monk returning to the world and ministering to the people. This conclusion might be suggested by the final scene (of the sunset), which shows Kibong leading an ox behind him, although that part of the ox-herding sequence is much earlier than the final

illustration of the mendicant monk.

Although one can summarize the basic narrative events of the film, its meaning cannot be reduced to the physical plotline. In fact, the scenery, dialogue, soundtrack and acting all create the impression that something very significant is happening to the characters; however, the nature of that significance is not evident. The film raises many questions for audiences with and without backgrounds in Zen and Asian religions. For the uninitiated, the following questions might seem the most pressing. Why is Kibong so cruel in leaving first his mother, then Haejin? Is Kibong returning to take care of his mother, or will he return to the city temple? What do the long scenic shots of mountains and water mean? What, finally, is the point of *Why Did Bodhidharma Leave for the East?* One reviewer describes the responses of American students to the film: they worried about the inadequacies of Haejin's child care, raised questions about Kibong's relationship to his father, and noted apparent differences between the monastic and city lives portrayed in the film (Gillespie paragraphs 13-14). These questions seem to focus on the emotional and familial ties represented in the film, all of which are troubling.

Those who have a background in Asian religions find that the film raises slightly different questions. One reviewer, Rhim Hye-kyung of *Cineymaya: The Asian Film Magazine*, questions the way the film was created, asking: "Is the director of this film a radical anachronist, swimming against the tide of the post-industrial society? Is he a Herculean figure, waging a lone battle against the cultural imperialism of the West? Or is he the mystic practicing Zen with the camera?" (quoted in Milestone paragraph 19) The reviewer suggests that the film's rejection of the norms of Hollywood filmmaking implies the director is asserting Korean cultural autonomy through a "search for the roots of Korean culture and spirit" (Milestone paragraph 23). Later the same reviewer proposes that "there is a strong social concern" in the film (Milestone paragraph 23), prompting him to ask "why Kibong is recruited from the slum milieu; how is this related to his criticism of his master for staying in the mountains, and his final departure from the monastery into the world?" (Milestone paragraph 23). Although one may not appreciate the class tension in the film on the first viewing, it is arguable that its scenes of poverty and hardship refer more to the

modern world than the aesthetic practices of the Zen master. Perhaps the social concern that strikes most deeply is that surrounding Kibong's decision to leave his mother, but this is a criticism that Zen has long faced from Asian religions such as Confucianism, which strongly emphasize social and familial duty.

Tony Rayns, a reviewer for *Sight and Sound*, describes the film as “an almost programmatic account of ‘the way of Zen’” (Rayns 47). He asserts that it is “surprisingly easy to reduce the film to one central issue: the problem of coming to terms with physical death” (Rayns 47). Since each reviewer — Gillespie and his students, Rayns, Rhim Hye-kyung of *Cinemaya*, and myself — has reduced the film to a different central issue, it might be more accurate to suggest that the film raises the one question that most directly troubles the particular viewer. Rayns later describes the Zen content of the film as “not exactly revelatory” (Rayns 47), but admits that “despite its underlying obviousness the film *does* edge towards a seductive irrationality” (Rayns 47), thanks to its narrative innovations. Rayns seems to favor other Korean filmmakers' approaches to dealing with Zen in film, such as that of Kwon-Taek, whose films “dramatise the conflicts between different schools of Buddhism and measure Buddhist ideals against social and sexual realities” (Rayns 47). Rayns seems to suggest that, as far as interacting with Zen, *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* has nothing new to offer.

Regardless of whether one sees the film as problematic or programmatic, the critical viewer requires some understanding of the religious tradition that the film is either promoting or questioning. One of Buddhism's main goals is to overcome old age, disease and ultimately death, as well as spiritual afflictions like ignorance, greed and hatred. These are overcome by an experience of enlightenment, though which one realizes the true nature of one's self and the reality of the world around one. Zen practitioners are encouraged to realize the doctrines of no-self and emptiness (*shunyata*), the understanding that everything and everyone are not separate and autonomous, but mutually occurring and influential. This interconnectedness also relates to the Buddhist idea of karma. In the world of karmic cause and effect, all actions have consequences. An act of violence, for example, will result in a negative karmic consequence, either spiritually through guilt or a

continuation of affliction, or physically by means of a reciprocated violence or negative experience.

One of the more difficult doctrines of Zen is its view of language, which asserts that one cannot label and reify our changing experiences into clear-cut, separate categories without somehow misunderstanding the true scope of a dynamic experience through simplification. Although rich in texts, the Zen tradition emphasizes the inability of language to fully express truth. As one reviewer, Michael Gillespie, points out, the Zen view of language is that it “tends, of its very nature, to introduce dualities and reifications” (Gillespie paragraph 20). Although thinking about things in black or white terms might be superficially helpful, eventually a Zen practitioner must move past surface, arbitrary delineations and realize that these are ultimately constructions, not realities. To encourage this breakthrough in awareness, Zen uses different methods to overcome the natural, dualistic approach that most people use to understand the world around and within them, and to move on to new and more comprehensive views of how the world and self interact. One such method is Zen paintings: “their spareness and wit is simple, defies easy or ready-made interpretations, and demands that the viewers bring a lot to the interpretation” (Gillespie paragraph 22). The paintings defy overly conventional and dualistic thought, not only by avoiding conventional language, but through their “spareness” or lack of elaboration as well. Zen is wary not only of conventional language, but also of overly conventionalized imagery. Thus, the paintings attempt to place the burden of constructing meaning on the viewer rather than the artist as much as possible, thus avoiding the traps of conventional thought that language has laid.

Zen painting, like many other traditions within Zen, shares motifs with the film. One famous series of ink paintings is the ox-herding series. There are different versions of the series, but typically they follow a narrative sequence and portray an individual’s quest for enlightenment through the metaphor of the lost ox. The ox represents both the original, enlightened nature of the pursuer and the mind that the ox-herder must control in order to reach enlightenment. Toward the beginning of the painting series, the ox breaks free from its stall and wanders through the woods. This escape symbolizes the catalyst

for the individual's spiritual search. Toward the end of the search, the ox has been found and docilely follows the ox-herder home. However, this is not the end of the spiritual journey in Zen terms, because the portrayal is dualistic: the ox and the ox-herder are still conceived of as separate entities. This separateness does not reflect Zen's understanding of reality because it suggests that the mind of enlightenment (symbolized by the ox) and the mind of control (symbolized by the ox-herder), although working together, are still separate. One must move past not only the problems previously illustrated by the ox metaphor, but also the ox metaphor itself. Before the series ends, both the ox and the ox-herder disappear in the realization that, in fact, they are both part of the same mind — that the arbitrary delineation between the two was helpful at one point (to give the student a goal to work toward), but is less helpful the more one learns about enlightenment and the self.

A similar Zen technique of overcoming dualism is *shiketsu*, translated loosely as “poetry.” Daishin Adachi suggests that “the world of Zen cannot be explained through words, so a method beyond words called *shiketsu* [poetry] ...is employed...to express the heart of Zen” (Milestone paragraph 6). *Shiketsu* provides a way for people to circumvent or question the normal meanings and connotations of language. Traditionally, poetry pushes language outside of its normal context to better or more beautifully express ideas or experiences. In this way, the conventions and innovations of poetry are well suited to help avoid the dualities and simplifications of normal language. Zen has taken the form and adapted it to its own purpose, utilizing *shiketsu* to explore Zen concepts in a way that defies common dualities.

Another teaching device that attempts to overcome traditional dualities and, in fact, one of the major teaching methods utilized by several sects of Zen, is the koan, or *gong'an*. A koan often assumes the form of a question, but acts as riddle or problem that the student must grapple with. The struggle to understand the koan forces the student out of his or her normal or comfortable modes of thought, and forces them both to reevaluate conventional knowledge and to use it to realize something new. This method has a particularly significant connection to the film because koans are not only used in the film by the instructing Zen master, but are also suggested by its

title, a well-known koan in Zen tradition: “Why has Bodhidharma left for the east?” The Zen tradition of koans often claims that they are impossible to solve logically, and demands that intuition be utilized instead. However, context and convention ultimately lead the student to a right answer. Sheng-Yen, a contemporary Chinese Zen master, explains why he rarely uses koans with his American students, saying: “it is exceedingly difficult to derive any real benefits from *gongán* [koans] without significant foundation in Ch’an [Zen] practice. Should one try to penetrate *gongán* without such a foundation, one really won’t know where to begin” (Sheng-Yen 128). In many ways, his description of the difficulty that students from outside of the Zen tradition face when approaching koans can be applied to our reaction to the movie as well. Without “significant foundation” in Zen [Ch’an] literature, the significance of the film *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* can be very difficult to discern. To resolve the questions the film raises, the viewer must explore the Zen context in which the director Bae Yong-kyun situates the film.

How are the viewers’ questions answered by Zen doctrines within the film? The more one explores Zen paintings, *shiketsu*, koans and literature, the more one sees references to ideas and experiences reflected throughout the film. From the scenic shots of mountains to the dialogue, the film is not simply 135 minutes of bizarre nonsense. Rather it is the story of a man who is struggling to make sense of himself and his experience through a tradition that is challenging and rich; although at times frustrating, the film inspires through its faith in the potential of the human mind.

One of the more cryptic elements of the film is its narrative structure, one that is interspersed with long shots of trees, mountains, rivers and so on. However, these breaks in the narrative are actually references to Zen nature imagery. Two significant examples can be found repeatedly in the film: long shots of waving greenish-silver leaves and running streams. The Zen [Ch’an] quality of this image is expressed by a contemporary Zen master, Hsing Yun: “Have you ever listened to a rippling brook? That’s the sound of Ch’an! Have you ever looked at the green leaves of a willow? That is the color of Ch’an!” (Hsing Yun paragraph 89). The images are connected by a contemporary Zen master to the heart of Zen [Ch’an] tradition, and

their place in the film is a way of connecting it to the tradition as well.

These narrative breaks of mountains and rivers do not simply refer to Zen for Zen's own sake, however. They serve a dual purpose in how the film affects its audience. The breaks pull attention away from the narrative, invoking a meditative state and demanding interpretation. As Gillespie says, one must indeed "bring a lot to the interpretation." What one must bring is some familiarity with Zen, as well as some way to integrate the stillness and meditative tone of the scenes back into the narrative, in order to answer the question: what do these shots mean to the movie? As Rayns suggests, the images "transcend picturesqueness and induce an unexpected degree of concentration in the viewer" (Rayns 47). They force the viewer to think about what he is seeing, not just experience it. The repetitiveness and the duration of the naturalistic breaks give these scenes emphasis. Because such scenes are of natural phenomena so significant in Zen — rivers, mountains, flowing water — there seems to be, as Gillespie suggests throughout his critique, an emphasis on interdependence. As Hyegok states in the film, "mountains, rivers, plants...here and there everything is in the same enclosure." The film avoids language problems by supplementing and/or supplanting language with visual "texts" such as these, so that the ideas and views of the film are not simplified to mere "slogans," as Gillespie suggests they might have been. Thus the film is more than Zen propaganda; in actuality, it is utilizing Zen methods to create a Zen effect, not to document the methods themselves or necessarily even promote them.

The already complex narrative is also punctuated by flashbacks to Kibong's city life, his days at a monastery, and the dreams and visions that Haejin experiences while lost in the woods. Because of the fragmentary nature of the film, as it shifts abruptly from scene to scene, it is difficult to tell what is reality, what exists only as a memory in the past, and what is a dream. Such narrative acrobatics, following Kibong along the spiritual steps of his journey rather than temporal ones, also force the viewer away from a linear reaction into an intuitive one. The audience follows Kibong's frustration through emotive states; when he is full of doubt at the hermitage, the viewers see his struggle to leave the world in a flashback. These interruptions in the plot shift emphasis away from discursive narrative as they simultaneously

demand interpretation, forcing one to rely on more than words or plot to make sense of the experiences shown.

Another method of avoiding the dualities and reifications of language was previously mentioned, namely *shiketsu*. Among the comments in the Milestone Release on the film, Adachi describes a “method beyond words that tries to circumvent language problems via poetry,” which Adachi then connects to the film, asserting that “the auteur of this film has employed the dynamic...method of filmmaking to portray Zen in an expressive, poetic manner”(Milestone paragraph 7). By shifting the weight of the film onto image and sound, *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*, like poetry, invokes the senses in an attempt to transcend ordinary language. The sparse dialogue, described by Gillespie as “cryptic and at first enigmatic”(paragraph 2), also functions in a poetic sense. As with so much contemporary poetry, even narrative poetry, the meaning is not always clear. Rather, the emphasis is placed on experience, sensation and the beauty of language. One must bring a traditional Buddhist cosmology to bear on it in order to find meaning and content.

An example of the way in which the film’s dialogue functions similarly to *shiketsu* is one of the scenes where Kibong is mourning his father. When a street vendor calls outside Kibong’s house, “sell your old objects, sell your obligations; I buy old TV sets, old watches,” his dialogue has a lyrical effect, created by the repetition of “old” and the listing of objects at the end. The use of the word “obligations” is unexpected in reference to objects. This is resolved by applying the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment: that one’s possessions literally connect one back to the world and to life. Possessions “obligate” one to fulfill certain roles, for with these objects come responsibilities. At the same time, however, the scene works on a level beyond words. The sorrowful tone of the street vendor, perhaps weary with the weight of his own obligations; the lyrical quality of his cry; the time when he comes to Kibong, after his father’s death; and the use of the spiritually and socially significant word “obligations” in conjunction with the mundane examples of televisions and watches — all of these combine to evoke a feeling of lament, of confinement, that cannot be experienced through words alone. In this way, the scene functions on a poetic, super-lingual level that, like Zen ink drawings and *shiketsu*,

manages to express an idea while avoiding the reification that troubles ordinary language. The film places its emphasis less on words and traditional narrative structures than on intuitive or emotional responses.

To a Western audience, however, the effect of the film is much more puzzling than programmatic, even if its program relies on images or poetry. The narrative decisions themselves assume additional meaning when taken in their Zen context, creating difficulties for the Western viewer which acquire koan-like significance. For example, one of the main issues raised by the film is Kibong's decision to leave his mother for the monastery and ultimately the hermitage. The film suggests two points of view: fleeing the world and returning to it. Both actions are invoked by either of two contrasting characters: a fellow disciple at the monastery who decides to return to the world and Hyegok, the hermit who lives on the mountain. The fellow disciple invokes the tale of the Buddha, questioning his decision to leave the world: "Was that flight an abandonment of the world? No, the departure was simply the process of returning. In fact, he never left; he came back inside us all." Yet this disciple decides to go back to the world, saying that his search for perfection, his distaste for the "dust and dirt of the world" made enlightenment impossible. He had to go back to embrace them.

This response is valid in Zen terms. To reach enlightenment, one must get over the duality of the "the mundane world" versus "absolute perfection." The distaste that the disciple speaks of is a symptom of dualistic thinking, the notion that experience can be categorized and reified into the dual categories of impure (dust, garbage) and pure. Thus, his decision to return is valid. Following this, Kibong questions Hyegok about his decision to stay in the mountains in a way similar to the viewer's question about Kibong's own decision to leave his mother. Hyegok responds that he must be there for people like Kibong, and tells him to refocus on the koan. Later, Hyegok seems to respond more directly to the question of leaving. When Kibong begs him not to die, Hyegok says, "To leave is to arrive. To arrive is to leave." This enigmatic statement seems like a simple renunciation of dualism, yet it offers little insight into Kibong's predicament or Hyegok's own mortality; rather, it seems to excuse Kibong's flight. At first, these two viewpoints appear irreconcilable — one person returning to the

world and the other seeming to leave it. As with the elements of a koan, discursive thinking is not useful here, for a higher intuitive state must be reached. Who is right?

It might seem that the film is, in truth, only raising the question, not answering it. As Gillespie suggests, “[as] the questioning title indicates, what is addressed is a question regarding the essence of the way” (paragraph 18), and it is tempting to view the movie as a koan, a riddle which the viewer must resolve herself without the help of the koan or the film that raises it. But after reviewing the film carefully, I believe that the question does resolve itself, and in a typical Zen fashion (if one can claim there is a typical Zen). What Hyegok says about leaving becomes less of an excuse (i.e., that the consequences of Kibong’s decision are unimportant compared to his enlightenment) and more of a statement of fact: to return or to leave are the same action in the film, motivated by the same quest for enlightenment — the ultimate return and the ultimate departure. Because everything is so interconnected, there is no real way to leave the world or to return to it. The duality of the situation is one that Zen rejects. But this is a difficult realization to articulate. At the end of the film, is Kibong returning to the world, either to rejoin the city temple or support his mother, or is he returning to minister to the world like the monk in the final drawing of the ox-herding sequence? It is important to the viewer who wants to know if Kibong feels like his earlier departure was a mistake for which he must atone by returning to his mother, or if he believes he has chosen the right path and will follow it even further away from his family. In Zen terms, however, the question is not really important. What is important is that Kibong’s eyes have been opened to the nature of reality by the monk Hyegok and his death. Whatever Kibong is going to face, he goes with his eyes open; returning or leaving combine into the same spiritually significant act. He leaves the hermitage, returns to the world. He leaves duality, returns to truth. But in actuality, all these things are connected and the same. This, and not the social reality of his mother’s destitution, is the film’s final assertion.

For non-Zen audiences, the film raises questions that require context. The viewer explores Zen and re-examines the film in more depth and detail. In a way, Rayns is right when he says that *Bodhidharma*

is “pedantic in its insistence on explication” (Rayns 47). The film teaches through its obscurity, for it makes the exploration of Zen necessary. When one returns to the film, one finds that it had answered the questions all along. What was initially problematic outside its Zen context becomes programmatic in its manifestations of a Zen point of view. Questions that seemed impossible to reconcile become irrelevant. In this sense the film acts as a koan. A koan raises a question, seemingly impossible to answer, but when one explores Zen context, the answer becomes obvious. Thus “was Kibong right to leave his mother?” is answered by “leaving and returning are the same!” — a very koan-like response.

In the same way, the question of whether or not Kibong and Haejin are enlightened seems unimportant after thinking deeply about the film. It could be argued either way, given how the movie ends, with Haejin freed from the karmic consequences of the jay he killed, aware of the nature of life and death, and Kibong, finally reconciled to death also, leading his ox out into the world. But the enlightenment experience is one that has to be validated by a Zen master. When Kibong leads his docile ox back into the valley of the world, the film invokes an image toward the middle of the ox-herding series: the ox-herder in this image has faced reality and is in control of his nature, but is not yet completely enlightened. With this background, we are not encouraged to view Kibong or Haejin as fully enlightened, although the distinction between enlightened and unenlightened may be forced in the interpretation. Indeed, Shen Yen, in his exegesis of the ox-herding pictures, asserts that the “mind of affliction is not separate from the mind of enlightenment” (203). Rather than trying to determine whether or not the two are enlightened, it is easier, and more in line with Zen tradition, to think of the final scenes in less dualistic terms: their eyes have been opened. Because of the narrative distance of the film, it is impossible to say what they see through them.

It would be difficult to claim that the movie does not raise any questions from a Zen perspective. It is, in fact, the nature of Zen media to raise questions and force the audience to push their understanding of Zen and reality further. Thus, like the tradition of Zen itself and the methods it employs, it is likely that *Why Has*

Bodhidharma Left for the East? is problematic to all of its audiences as well as programmatic. In fact, it is the problematic nature of the film that best serves its programmatic intent. Ultimately, the movie asks one to react more fully to Zen, and whether one first sees the film as problematic or as programmatic because of its heavy Zen content and context, it is fitting to suggest that such dualities are, in the end, superficial.

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