How to Attain Enlightenment? The Pramāṇa and the Chan Schools on the Practice of Meditation

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Abstract: Throughout the history of Buddhism, the main goal of Buddhists has been to attain enlightenment. This paper investigates how the Pramāṇa and the Chan schools define enlightenment and their ways of attaining it. The Pramāṇa school deals with enlightenment and problems relevant to it in terms of yogipratyaksa, or the intuition of an omniscient being (sarvajñā). On the other hand, the Chan school developed gongan meditation, which leads to enlightenment by contemplating a huatou, the key phrase of a gongan. This paper focuses on examining and comparing the following issues in these two schools: (1) the motivations for seeking enlightenment, (2) the role of meditation in each, and (3) the process of attaining enlightenment.

Keywords: meditation; enlightenment; yogipratyaksa; gongan; huatou

1. Preliminary Remarks

Ever since the Buddha first propagated his teaching, the attainment of enlightenment has been a main task for Buddhists to achieve. It has occupied a special position in Buddhism as the link between theory and practice. Enlightenment is the object of experience for practitioners as well as the object of proof for logicians. Throughout the history of Buddhism, various paths to enlightenment have been developed, such as the Noble Eightfold Path.

Since the division of the Saṅgha, enlightenment has been understood differently by different schools. In Indian Buddhism, the Yogācāra school developed the most detailed theory of enlightenment and how to attain it. Its successor, the Pramāṇa school shows a special interest in how to explain it in the context of epistemology and logic. Dharmakīrti (600–660), the most influential figure in this school, deals with enlightenment in terms of yogipratyaksa, the cognition of practitioners. As an essential part of the Buddha's omniscience, this cognition was a central issue for his followers, including Kamalaśīla (740–795), Darmottara (750–810), Prajñākaragupta (at the beginning of the 9th c.), and Jñānaśrīmitra (960–1030), to investigate.

In Chinese Buddhism, in contrast, enlightenment and how to attain it have especially attracted the attention of the Chan school. Since this school was founded with the arrival of the legendary Indian monk named Bodhidharma (around the 6th c.), it has been further developed by many eminent teachers, such as Huineng (638–713), Matzu (707–788), Paichang (720–814), Linchi (?–867), and Tahui (1089–1163). These teachers introduced specialized meditation methods. Their teaching can be summarized in four phrases: non-establishment of words and letters (buli wenzi), cutting off the path of language (yanyu dao duan), directly pointing to people's minds (zhizhi renxin), and seeing one's own nature to become a Buddha (jianxing chengfu).

This paper examines how the Pramāṇa and the Chan schools deal with the problem of enlightenment through Dharmakīrti’s and Huineng’s teachings, respectively. This task is not easy because these schools developed in different places and there was no actual dialogue between these two masters from India and China. However, I will use their adherents' views to explore and compare their ideas about the following issues: (1) why one
should practice meditation; (2) which factors affect meditation; and (3) how to attain enlightenment.

2. Yogipratyakṣa and the Process of Meditation in the Pramāṇa School

In debates with the Mīmāṃsā school, the Pramāṇa school gave an explanation of why one should practice meditation. This Hindu school argues that Buddhists should not practice meditation in order to attain enlightenment. That is to say, from the Mīmāṃsā perspective, a man who performs an activity must, by definition, hold a certain desire for a result of the activity. However, the desire to practice meditation on the Four Noble Truths, which are the object of Buddhist meditation, is in contrast to the goal of such meditation, i.e., the cessation of desire; therefore, meditating to achieve enlightenment becomes self-contradictory.

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Dharmakīrti and his followers refuted this Mīmāṃsāka view on the basis of the Buddha’s teaching that everything in the world of samsāra is suffering. Birth, death, and all events in between are suffering. For this reason, practitioners pursue nīrūpā either to avoid suffering or out of compassion for those who suffer. These are the very motivations behind the practice of meditation. The fact that life is an ocean of suffering assures practitioners that practicing meditation can liberate them from suffering.

According to Prajñākaragupta, an important follower of Dharmakīrti, one can be free from suffering through tranquility (śamatha) and insight (vipaśyanā). The former refers to the stilling of thoughts and the development of concentration, while the latter refers to the application of one’s power of concentration to the Four Noble Truths. Through these two methods, practitioners contemplate the aspects (ākāra) of the Truths, such as selflessness and momentariness, with attention, without interruption, and over a long period of time.

Yet, a problem remains in the position of the Pramāṇa school: this school asserts that practitioners contemplate selflessness and so on through tranquility and insight. How can suffering be removed through these processes? In order to answer such a question, Kamalaśīla, another important follower of Dharmakīrti, introduces the following logical formula:

[Pervasion:] If a thing X which is incompatible (viruddha) with another thing Y exists at a certain place, then Y cannot exist there. For instance, darkness cannot exist at the place where a lantern is shining.

[Reason’s being a property of the topic of a proposition:] In a person who realizes that everything is without self, there is the view of selflessness (nairātmyadarśana), which is incompatible with the aggregate of unwholesome qualities (doṣa). The unwholesome qualities here are defilements or afflictions (kleśa), such as greed, hatred, and ignorance. These defilements, which both produce and comprise suffering, are based on the false view that a self exists. Suffering arises when the view that a self exists appears, and it ceases when this view disappears. Thus, suffering and the false view that a self exists are related through joint-presence (antarāya) and joint-absence (antatā). Please recover the original note. That is, insert the note 8 right after “(antarāya)”. In this note 8, mention “See (Woo 2005, pp. 117–18)”. In order to be free from suffering, the followers of Dharmakīrti sought to abandon this false view through the concept of virodha, the relationship of incompatibility which is crucial in Buddhist logic. The views of a self and non-self are incompatible and cannot exist within the same person. The means of abandoning the view that a self exists is nothing other than understanding that no self exists. As a result, meditating on selflessness is a powerful antidote to suffering. When practitioners realize that every dharma is selfless, they no longer experience suffering as a result of the false view that a self exists.

In the Pramāṇa school, enlightenment is explained on the basis of yogipratyakṣa which can be achieved through meditation. This intuition is divested of the snares of judgment (vikalpa) and is characterized as vividly manifesting the truths that the Buddha taught.
The *yogipratyakṣa* is [the cognition] that arises from the termination (*paryanta*) of the intensification (*prakāra*) of meditation (*bhāvanā*) on a true object. Practitioners do not achieve enlightenment suddenly but gradually. Their meditation continues until they realize the Four Noble Truths. In the first stage of intensification, practitioners repeatedly internalize the aspects (*ākāra*) of the Four Noble Truths, such as selflessness. At this stage, these aspects begin and continue to gain clarity in their mind.

In the second stage of termination, intensification ends, and meditation reaches its culmination. According to Dharmottara, an important commentator on the *Nyāyabindu*, in this stage, the aspects of the Four Noble Truths are almost as clear as if they were covered by transparent mica.

This stage is the direct cause of *yogipratyakṣa*. In the third stage of yogic intuition, the clariy of the object of meditation is completed, and the Four Noble Truths have the same degree of vividness as the object of sense-perception (*indriyajñāna*).

Thus, practitioners grasp selflessness just as clearly as if they are looking at something on the palms of their hands. At this point, they are free from all unwholesome qualities and so are able to see everything as it is (*tathatā*).

In the Pramāṇa school, these three stages of the practice depend on the school’s ontological differentiation between moment (*ksaṇa*) and continuum (*santāna*). From the perspective of this school, everything is momentary, including the cognition of practitioners. During meditative practice, cognitions arise and perish moment by moment. The cognition at one moment is different from that at its succeeding moment; the aspect that a cognition-moment grasps is different from that which its succeeding cognition-moment grasps. How then are the preceding and the succeeding cognition-moments connected with each other? The followers of Dharmakīrti provide a causal relationship as the link between them. The cognition in one moment causes the cognition in the succeeding moment. Thus, meditative practice is the process through which the aspects such as selflessness become manifested in a series of cognitions, each of which is the effect of its preceding cognition-moment and the cause of its succeeding moment.

During meditation, only cognition in one moment causing its succeeding cognition-moment is actual. The continuum which consists of such cognition-moments is just a conceptual construction (*vikalpa*). The practice of meditation is actually done moment by moment; therefore, practitioners have to meditate on the Four Noble Truths in every single moment. In any given moment, *yogipratyakṣa* can be attained all at once. Nevertheless, in order for practitioners to become enlightened, they must make constant efforts for countless time to vividly perceive the Four Noble Truths. Thus, this process is gradual.

Even if practitioners attain *yogipratyakṣa* through meditation, there is no guarantee that they will continuously remain there. The Pramāṇa school holds that everything is changing moment by moment; hence, nothing stays the same over time. The state of yogic intuition can change too. The Mimāṃśākas argue that the practice of meditation is pointless unless it is done continuously. They illustrate this through the analogy of melting down copper and letting it cool, which causes it to re-solidify. In the same way, when meditation on selflessness stops, the false view that a self exists will return and bring suffering with it. In order to refute this argument by the Mimāṃśākas, Kamalaśīla presents the following:

For what is produced by each preceding practice becomes the nature [of practitioners] and hence indestructible; as such, it goes on producing fresh properties during subsequent efforts; there is the successive basis [for meditative practice]; and wisdom and the rest are produced out of homogeneous seeds at the preceding moment.

Kamalaśīla counters the Mimāṃśākas’ example with another metal analogy. When gold is processed from ore, it is separated from impurities and does not return to its raw ore state after the processing stops. Meditation on selflessness works in the same way. Even when practitioners stop meditating, their mind does not then revert to its previous states. Thus, practice in one moment causes practice in the subsequent moment; therefore, the view of
non-self produces a homogeneous fruit. Intensification can proceed thus until practitioners obtain yogipratyakṣa.

Kamalaśīla maintains that practitioners do not retreat from the highest stage of meditation as far as they achieve it. The seeds of suffering are completely destroyed when they firmly adopt the view of non-self. This phenomenon is similar to how wood that is burned to ash does not become wood again after the fire goes out. In the same way, suffering does not return after the practice of meditation ceases. In this way, Dharmakīrti and his followers show the process of meditative practice for attaining enlightenment.

3. Gongan Meditation and the Attainment of Enlightenment in the Chan School

The Chan school treats meditation more rigorously than the Pramāṇa school. In the Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng explains that meditation should be practiced based on the four great vows of a Buddha or Boddhisattva, which are as follows:

1. save all living beings without limit;
2. put an end to all defilements however numerous;
3. study and learn all methods for understanding Dharma without end; and
4. become perfect under the supreme Buddha-law.

Sentient beings are strongly influenced by false views and delusions, which are rooted in ignorance (avidyā), and so are unable to understand that they are by nature Buddhas. Thus, the practice of meditation is necessary in order to remove these defilements and to uncover their Buddha nature.

Huineng’s method for removing defilements is the practice of Chan. His followers, Linchi and Tahui recommend phrase-observing meditation (kanhua chan). Through this meditation, practitioners seek to attain enlightenment by contemplating a hua tou in great questioning/doubt (tai). Here, however, a question occurs: Why does a hua tou become the object of contemplation? In the Chan school, enlightenment is characterized as being non-conceptual (nirvikalpika). However, a hua tou is nothing but the key phrase of a gongan, and is not even from the words of the Buddha. Thus, it seems that contemplating it does not guarantee that concepts will be left behind.

In order to answer such a question, it is necessary to understand what gongan is. In Chan Buddhism, the word gong refers to a great teaching, and an refers to a right path in which one practices the teaching. Thus, gongan is a teaching about the ultimate nature of reality that is understood by a practitioner. For example, it could be used to describe a situation when Chan masters provide their students with a special opportunity for enlightenment. Chan masters call gongan a living phrase (huojü), which is a statement that leads their student to directly realize a truth. It is similar to shouting “Fire!” to someone sleeping in a burning building. This shouting is not intended to deliver any particular meaning to listeners, but rather to wake them up and incite them to leave the building. Thus, it is useless to analyze the linguistic meaning of a gongan.

Let us take a gongan, or more directly, its key phrase hua tou, as the object of meditation. But how is it guaranteed that contemplating it makes practitioners penetrate the ultimate nature of reality? A famous gongan is: A monk asked Zhaozhou (778–897), “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?” Zhaozhou answered, “No”. This and other gongans seem to communicate nothing about the nature of dharmas, such as selflessness. Taego (1301–1382), a famous Korean Chan master in the Linchi Chan school, explains that a gongan can be used to attain enlightenment as follows:

The hua tou, “No” is just like an arcane substance. As soon as this substance touches iron, the iron turns into gold. In the same way, as soon as practitioners penetrate the “No”, they see the [original] face of Buddhas in the three periods of time.

When practitioners penetrate a hua tou, they drive away all defilements and become omniscient. Nevertheless, these questions still remain: Why is it so when they penetrate a hua tou? What is the role of hua tou when practitioners achieve enlightenment? The an-
The answer to these questions is that *huatou* are like a match that lights a lantern and so drives away darkness. They are a powerful antidote to ignorance, which is the root of suffering. When penetrating a *huatou*, practitioners bring the light of wisdom into the dark house of defilements.\(^{27}\)

Contemplating a *huatou* is a clue that leads practitioners to the truths which the Buddha taught. To illustrate this point, let us take a close look at a series of famous *gongan* in the Zhaozhoulu: A monk asked Zhaozhou, “What is the intention of Bodhidharma in coming from the west?” Zhaozhou answered, “The cypress tree in the front yard”.\(^{28}\) In this *gongan*, the answer, “The cypress tree in the front yard” is a *huatou*. The same question appears a couple of times in the same work. The *huatou* then varies. Sometimes, it is “Bed legs”.\(^{29}\) Sometimes, it is “Now, I am washing my foot”.\(^{30}\) These *huatous* are given to cut off the path of language and have deeper implications than they appear to possess. The student is trying to understand the true reality of all dharmas. Zhaozhou is trying to communicate that everything in the world reveals its true reality. Even a cypress tree in the front yard is unexceptional and so discloses a truth. Before enlightenment, it is unclear how this can be true, but after enlightenment it is clear.

According to Huineng, the Chan practice involves the processes of being free from all outward distractions and of observing one’s own nature (Yampolsky 1967, p. 140). The stages that practitioners achieve during *gongan* meditation are as follows:\(^{31}\)

1. **tranquility** (*kongji*): body and mind are completely empty;
2. **numinous awareness** (*lingzhi*): inconceivable light manifests clearly and calmly; and
3. **enlightenment**: all things are seen as they are.

The goal of tranquility is to stop the flow of thoughts; the goal of numinous awareness is to investigate the nature of things through wisdom; and the goal of enlightenment is to realize a truth. In the first stage, all defilements disappear. In the second stage, the light of wisdom is fully manifested. These two stages can be compared to the common meditative practices of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. They then lead to enlightenment.

As mentioned earlier, *gongan* meditation is a means of contemplating a *huatou* in great questioning/doubt. Its example is that a practitioner is continuously questioning why “a cypress tree in the front yard” is the answer to the question, “What is the intention of Bodhidharma in coming from the west?” Thus, a *huatou* is not understood in and of itself, but rather is the object of a continual succession of questions. Chan masters describe what is realized through contemplating a *huatou* in various terms: Mind, a thing (*yiwu*), a Buddha, or Tao.\(^{32}\) However, these are just words while the truth is non-conceptual and therefore ineffable.\(^{33}\)

Huineng and his followers do not deal with the problem of retreating from enlightenment. This is relevant to their view that even if living beings achieve enlightenment for only a moment, they become Buddhas from that moment onward.\(^{34}\) After practitioners attain enlightenment, they are permanently rid of their ignorance and never retreat from their enlightened states. As a result of this view, Chan masters tend to focus on the certifying procedure called *yinke*, which is the approval of enlightenment that Chan masters give to their disciples. Those who are certified are qualified to succeed and unfold the methods of their lineage (*jiafeng*).

### 4. Concluding Remarks

The Pramāṇa and the Chan schools deal with enlightenment differently. As logicians, Dharmakīrti and his followers focus on how to prove enlightenment from a theoretical perspective. In contrast, Huineng and his followers focus on how to attain enlightenment from a practical perspective. Their views about how to achieve enlightenment are also different. According to Dharmakīrti and his followers, the practice of meditation is the process of directly perceiving the aspects (*ākāra*) of the Four Noble Truths, such as selflessness. When practitioners vividly manifest them in their mind, they attain *yogipratyakṣa* and realize the Truths as an enlightened Buddha. In the case of Huineng and his followers, however, meditation is the process of contemplating the *huatou* of a *gongan* in order...
to attain enlightenment. What practitioners realize is not a *huatou*, but rather their own nature which is referred to by various terms, such as Mind. When practitioners penetrate a *huatou*, they become a Buddha.

Despite these differences, the Pramāṇa and the Chan schools have identical justifications for practicing meditation, which are to save oneself and others from suffering. Both schools pursue the fulfillment of the bodhisattva’s vow to save all sentient beings. These two schools also share the definition of what enlightenment is. The Pramāṇa school defines reaching enlightenment as what happens when practitioners vividly manifest the aspects of the Four Noble Truths, such as selflessness, in their mind. The Chan school defines it as when practitioners realize their own Buddhahood. Both definitions of enlightenment mean to understand the true nature of all dharmas. In addition, these schools have the same view about the epistemological structure of meditation. The practice of meditation begins with investigating phrases such as “all dharmas are selfless” in the Pramāṇa school and “the cypress tree in the front yard” in the Chan school. Meditation is the process of removing conceptual constructions to transform consciousness into non-conceptual awareness.

Dharmakīrti and his followers are logicians who deal with logic and epistemology. On the other hand, Huineng and his followers are Chan masters who are authorities on meditation. They set up different Buddhist traditions in India and China and so differed in some ways of their teachings. Nevertheless, they both hold the same views about the key issues of enlightenment: the motivations for meditation, its epistemological structure, and the definitions of enlightenment. Above of all, they ultimately seek the same Buddhist truths. This is why the doctrinal and the meditative approaches to the truths need each other.

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**Abbreviations**

*DhPr* Dharmottarapradīpa of Panḍita Durveka Miśra. In Dharmottarapradīpa with

*NB* Nyāyabindu of Dharmakīrti. See DhPr.

*NBT* Nyāyabinduṭṭikā of Dharmottara. See DhPr.


*HBJ* Hanguk bulgyo jeonseo 韓國佛教全書

*J* Jiuxing zang 嘉興藏


*T* Taisho tripitaka 大正藏

*TR* Taego rok 太古錄. In HBJ vol. 6, pp. 670,a1–685,a23.


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Notes


2. For the topic on seemingly apparent discrepancy between pursuiving nirvāṇa and being without desires, see (Taber 2011; Franco 2012).

3. See PV 1.284c: dayāyā śreyo ācaṣṭe. Prajñākaragupta defines compassion (karuṇā) as “the wish that someone else would be disconnected from the cause of suffering as well as from suffering itself” (PVBh 1.377abc: duḥkhahetat tathā duḥkhād viyogecchā parasya śā, sā karuṇā”). See also (Iha 1986, p. 1477; Franco 1997, pp. 20–25).

4. Note PVBh 327,17: tathā ca śamānapaṅgaṇayogānaddhahāvāṁ mārgo yogas iti vacanam. For more detail about tranquility and insight with regard to the cognition of practitioners, see (Prévéreau 1994, pp. 77–79).

5. See TSP 1060,22: yā sādārantaṁ atarantarādikālaśīvalaśīvanā bhāvanā satāṁ bhavate...

6. Dharmakīrti devised the two-part syllogism. It consists of the statements of the “pervasion” (vyāpti) and the “reason’s being a property of the topic of a proposition” (pakṣadharmaṭā). His followers including Kamalāśīla employed this syllogism to prove Buddha ideas such as the theory of momentariness.

7. TSP 55,5–9: yattra yadhviddhavroṣṭsamacchādhānāṁ, na tatra tad apparam avasthitim āsādayati, yathā dipapraddaprabhāprasarasamārhini dharanīṭale timiram. asti ca dosagāṇvīrhuddharatukānāṁ paścāt nāmaśāyitaṁ.

8. For more on the concept of incompatibility in Buddhist logic, see (Bandyopadhyay 1988; Kūyōma 1999).


10. It becomes clear in the light of Prajñākaragupta’s PVBh that the criterion for the determinate and the indeterminate rests on vividness (svaṁśāya). See PVBh 326,24: spaṣṭāḥbhāvataḥ evaśīvalapakam tataḥ pratyakṣam.

11. NB I.11: bhūtārthabhāvanāprakraśayaudayantajñā namājñānam.

12. For further explanation of the three stages of meditative practice, see (Kajiya 1989, p. 240, n. 119; Woo 2005, pp. 112–13).

13. See DhPr 68,12: sa ca yathṣaṭṭhapatatadadhikasphuṭatvādārāmānī rūpaṇa tajjñānasusrabhaya eva.


16. For more on gradual and sudden enlightenment in the Pramāṇa school, see (Prévéreau 2004, pp. 77–79).

17. For more detail about the transformation of consciousness in every moment, see (Hattori and Ueyama 1970, p. 136f).


19. TSP 61,18–62,1: pūrvaśūnyaḥśāhīlātaya svabhāvanānāpāyaḥ, uttatatpratyaṣṭasāspūrvaśīlāśāhīlanākaṇisthāvatvāḥ, sthirāśrayatvāḥ, pūrvaśājayīśāpūrabhavatvāḥ ca prajñādeh.


21. LTJ 339,b14–16: 衆生無邊誓願海煩惱無邊誓願斷法門無邊誓願學佛道無上誓願成

22. Note LTJ 339,b18–19: 何名自性自度 自色身中 邪見煩惱 愚癡迷妄 自有本覺性 將正見度

23. Gongan is entire exchanges, usually dialogues between a master and a student, while huitou is the core issue of a gongan. In the famous gongan: “What was Bodhidharma’s intention in coming from the west?” “The cypress tree in the front yard”. (WG, case 37: Zhaozhou in Shihou). The question and the answer all together are a gongan while the answer alone is a huitou.

24. For more detail about what gongan is and the general discussions of the nature and structure of gongan meditation, see (Fouk 2000, pp. 28–33; Wright 2000, pp. 206–7; Hori 2003, pp. 5–29).

25. For more on the concept of living phrases, see (Buswell 1991, p. 69).

26. VG, case 1: 趙州和尚 因到臨濟方始洗腳 臨濟便問 如何是祖師西來意 師云 正值洗腳

27. For more on Zhaozhou’s ‘dog’ gongan, especially with reference to the Buddha-nature, see (Sharf 2007, pp. 224–26).

28. TR 676,b11–13: 這節無字 如一粒還代相類 剛離印成金 口擒疑無字 二世諸佛面目 摧毀翻出來。Here, the full phrase of miannu is benlai miannu. This phrase is well known in Case 23 of the WG, in which Huineng says, “Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil. At this very moment, what is your original face?” See WG 295,23: 不思善不思惡 正與摩時 這節是明上座本來面目。

29. LTJ 341,c22: 煩惱暗宅中 常須生惠日. Gongan is a skillful means to arrest discriminations and get rid of defilements. For more detail about what gongan is and the general discussions of the structure and gongan meditation, see (Fouk 2000, pp. 28–33; Wright 2000, pp. 206–7; Hori 2003, pp. 5–29).

30. See the previous note 24. After inserting the previously mentioned the note 8 (See page 2 of this manuscript), this “note 24” is correct. If the note 8 is not inserted as this present state, the number should be “note 23”.

31. Note ZhY 364,a30: 問 如何是祖師西來意 師云 床腳.

32. Note ZhY 369,c26–27: 問 因到臨濟方始洗腳 臨濟便問 如何是祖師西來意 師云 正值洗腳.

33. Note TR 678,c5–6: 只是箇惺惺寂寂 底靈光 卓爾現前 見解} and TR 678,a17–18: 空寂靈知 無壞無雜 如是用功 則不日成功.
32 See TR 677,b5–6: 一切施為 寂然昭著者 方便呼為心 亦云道 亦云萬法之王 亦云佛. For the various terms that express what is realized through contemplating a huatou, see (Buswell 1992, pp. 121–22). Although they are varied, all of these terms refer to the same truth.

33 As an effective tool for arriving at the place where there are no doubts, a huatou itself is not the ultimate goal of attainment. See (Buswell 1991, p. 348; Wright 2000, p. 208).

34 Note LTJ 340,b29: 一念若悟即眾生是佛.

References

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