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The Dharma Paradigm and Ethos Some Insights from Jainism and Vedānta

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Abstract

What is “the Dharma Paradigm”? And how might this paradigm be cultivated in such a way as to transform not only academic discourse, but the broader discourse of our global society? Transforming a discourse at a paradigmatic level is clearly not a simple matter of substituting Sanskritic terminology for the Eurocentric terminology that has tended to dominate global discourse—of, for example, calling religions “Dharma Traditions,” but continuing to think of them, basically, as “religions,” of calling our words “shabdās” and our scholarly texts “bhashyas.” The Dharma Paradigm is a re-thinking of all our shared categories in light of the wisdom of the Dharma Traditions, seen not simply as a kind of “folk wisdom,” of merely local or historical interest, but as constitutive of a universal and transformative knowledge, capable of responding in kind to the dominant categories of global discourse and presenting itself as a viable alternative. This paper will be dedicated to outlining what the Dharma Paradigm might look like were it to be enacted, as well as to delineating some preliminary steps that we, as scholars and public intellectuals, might take toward manifesting this paradigm in the world.

Background

In this essay, I would like to examine the issue of developing a Dharma Paradigm from a perspective that draws upon both Jain wisdom and the wisdom of the Vedānta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna. Why do I focus upon these two traditions specifically? The tradition of Ramakrishna, first of all, is the tradition I practice and identify as my spiritual home, while the Jain tradition is a fellow Dharma tradition with which I have engaged deeply in a search for insight that might assist me in articulating the ideal of pluralism and harmony affirmed by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Both are traditions I have studied in my career as a professional scholar of religion and that I teach regularly in my job as a teacher of both religion and Asian Studies at Elizabethtown College.

Although the focus of this volume is pragmatic, this essay has a more theoretical orientation. Its main purpose is to tap into the wisdom of Jainism and Vedānta in order to define and articulate what several of us in this volume are calling the *Dharma Paradigm*, though with an eye on the pragmatic issue of providing a conceptual foundation for both curricular models and pedagogical resources aimed at promoting this paradigm. Though I am not trained in the philosophy or methodology of pedagogy, I do have a good deal of experience developing and implementing courses and resources for representing Dharma traditions in an authentic fashion that is aimed not at

proselytizing, but at promoting the Dharma Paradigm on the understanding that simply portraying the Dharma traditions in an authentic and accurate way can actually do most of the work needed to promote this paradigm, without our having to go to any extraordinary lengths to “sell” or “market” it^a.

Indeed, in regard to pragmatic issues, this may be seen as the thesis of my paper: that Dharma speaks for itself. Presented well and authentically, its appeal to those who encounter it is spontaneous and natural. My job—my Dharma—as a teacher is to facilitate this encounter. Any kind of aggressive insistence that others adopt this paradigm is not only likely to be counterproductive, but it is also *adharmic*: that is, it runs counter to the principles of the Dharma Paradigm itself.

What is the Dharma Paradigm? establishing the criteria

Before proceeding much further, I should first explain what I mean when I refer to the Dharma Paradigm. As Rita D. Sherma has affirmed, it is necessary to define the Dharma Paradigm in a way that incorporates the diversity of the Dharma traditions and that avoids “essentialist monolithic statements, and the reductionism of ‘One Dharma Fits All (Sherma 2011)’”. A definition of the Dharma Paradigm that adheres to this principle will emphasize the areas in which the Dharma traditions overlap and will not “take sides” on issues where there is disagreement. This, at least, will be the ideal to which such a definition will aspire, while always being subject to correction in the awareness that the Dharma traditions are deeply, deeply complex, and particular ways of articulating even commonly held principles can be divisive and marginalizing if we are not attentive to this complexity. This ideal is not only conceptually more adequate to the richness of the Dharma traditions than one that seeks to impose a monolithic ideal. It is also a pragmatic and indeed a political necessity, given the potential criticism that the Dharma Paradigm is a mask for Hindu imperialism.

A definition of the Dharma Paradigm might, for example, incorporate the shared aspiration for liberation from the cycle of karma and rebirth that the Dharma traditions affirm. But if it were also to incorporate a strongly theistic orientation, with statements about Īśvara and the importance of a personal deity, it would immediately exclude both Jain and Buddhist traditions from the conversation.

And in the area of agreement just mentioned, regarding liberation from karma and rebirth, a very highly elaborated sense of who or what it is that achieves this liberation and how, is also bound to be divisive and exclusive, given the diverse understandings of *jīva*, Self, and non-Self that the Dharma traditions articulate.

Secondly, and conversely, while our definition of the Dharma Paradigm needs to avoid monolithic essentialisms, it also needs to be sufficiently substantive to distinguish itself from other paradigms, and to avoid vacuity. While, therefore, our definition of this paradigm does involve, as will be seen below, a strong affirmation of the virtues of truth and nonviolence, we cannot be content simply to say, “Dharma is truth” or “Dharma is nonviolence” and smile pleasantly at one another. Everyone, hopefully, is committed to truth as an ideal (and indeed logically must be, at the risk of self-referential incoherence), and the ideal of a world that is free from, or at least has a greatly diminished amount of, violence is widely shared. The paradigm that we are seeking to define is distinct from a variety of other dominant worldviews—such as the

Abrahamic Paradigm and the Secular Paradigm^b. It proposes distinct solutions to the human predicament that we, its adherents, believe are important to the survival of the species and of life on the planet itself. It also overlaps in significant ways with the two paradigms just mentioned; but before engaging in dialogue with other paradigms, it is important to be clear about what our own entails.

Defining the cosmology and values of the Dharma Paradigms: four features

Just because defining the Dharma Paradigm is a difficult, tricky, open-ended process does not mean it is impossible or not worth our while to try it. I would propose, as a starting point, the shared cosmology of karma, rebirth, and liberation that I have just mentioned, on the understanding that this cosmology can be supported by many different ontologies, or views about the fundamental nature of being.

I would add to this cosmology a shared set of values defined in the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali in terms of the five *yamas*, or moral restraints: *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence in thought, word, and deed), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (restraint in the area of sexuality), and *aparigraha* (detachment)^c. Like the cosmology of karma, rebirth, and liberation, these five moral virtues can be interpreted in a variety of ways, allowing for a diversity of interpretations and practical implementations, while nevertheless giving a certain measure of cohesion to this diversity. Does *ahiṃsā* require vegetarianism—and perhaps even veganism—as the Jain tradition affirms? Is it compatible with self-defense, in the form of limited violence inflicted without hatred or anger, to protect the innocent? A definition of the Dharma Paradigm that affirms the centrality of *ahiṃsā* does not have to preclude, *a priori*, any specific answer to these questions. It is therefore compatible on the one hand with the doctrine of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in regard to war for the protection of Dharma and the Sikh commitment to the protection of religious freedom, and on the other with the very strict Jain commitment to the avoidance of harm to all living beings.

In fact, if one might use the Jain tradition as a model in this regard, the five *yamas* affirmed by Patañjali are identical to the moral principles of Jainism. But recognizing the diverse levels of attainment that living beings have achieved, rather than presenting these five principles as a single set of guidelines, they are divided into two. As *mahāvratas*, or “great vows” that are taken by male and female Jain ascetics, these five moral principles are interpreted as strictly as humanly possible. Indeed, male ascetics of the Digambara community interpret the fifth principle, *aparigraha*, as precluding even the possession of clothing. But in their other form, as the *anuvratas*, or “lesser vows” observed by many Jain householders, exactly the same principles are affirmed in a way that is compatible with the necessities of householder life^d.

Finally, the five moral principles shared by the *Yoga Sūtra* and the Jain traditions are eminently compatible with Buddhism. The first four are identical with the *pañcaśīla* or “five precepts” of Buddhism and the fifth, detachment, is also a Buddhist virtue.

Here we have, then, an example of the unity in diversity that I see as one of the defining features of the Dharma Paradigm: a single set of moral principles, but applied in various ways as appropriate to the level of spiritual attainment of those who follow them. Similarly, as mentioned above, we have a single cosmology entailing karma, rebirth, and liberation, but multiple ontologies: that is, interpretations of this shared

cosmology in a variety of ways commensurate with the wisdom of the sages whose teachings generated and continue to sustain these traditions. The same basic cosmology can be seen as the play of the divine, as an effect of primordial ignorance, as the relentless working of a cosmos filled with karmic particles, or as the illusion created by attachment to self.

This unity in diversity points to a third element that I would add to my definition of the Dharma Paradigm: an element that has already been implicit in my discussion of its cosmological and ethical aspects. It is intrinsic to the Dharma Paradigm that we see the basic truths of existence as capable of being interpreted and embodied in a variety of ways. The internal pluralism we have already alluded to in the diverse interpretations of dharmic cosmology and morality can itself be seen as fundamentally dharmic. I see this dharmic pluralism as a Middle Path—to borrow a famous term from Buddhism—between the extremes of absolutism and relativism that seem to plague and paralyze the dominant discourses of our current period of global history.

On the one hand, there are the absolutisms of the world religions—often called by the blanket term *fundamentalism*—that assert exclusive possession of truth by whichever community is making the assertion. On the other hand, there is also the absolutism of dogmatic materialism, with its equally strident denial of any truth that is not available to the five bodily senses. These various absolutisms—the religious ones with one another, and all of them with materialism—can only interact violently, cancelling one another out.

This situation then leads to the debilitating relativism that seems to afflict many of our well-intentioned students and intellectuals: a relativism that makes them suspicious of all truth claims in the justified fear that such claims will provide a slippery slope toward the kind of violent fundamentalism that they rightly wish to decry. This position, though, paradoxically robs its adherents of the ability to critique anything in a substantive way. It creates a kind of intellectual paralysis; for if it is wrong to say anything is true, it cannot be true that it is wrong to say that anything is true. If the various fundamentalisms are mutually destructive, then this particular type of postmodernism is self-defeating.

The Dharma Paradigm shares with absolutism the fact that it makes a set of clear, substantive claims about the nature of existence and about what is right and wrong. But it shares with relativism the sense that how we perceive reality does depend a great deal on who we are and where we are located in the larger scheme of being. This can be seen, perhaps, as an epistemic analogue to the Vedic concept of *svadharmā*, or to the Buddhist and Jain distinctions between lay and ascetic morality. What is right or wrong, or true or false, does depend, in one sense, upon one's point of view. But this does not imply that there is no reality actually *there*, that one perceives and that has a definite character, part of which is to give rise to the various perceptions of it that, in fact, occur in our collective experience.

In this way the Dharma Paradigm can provide a model for the kind of in depth commitment that attracts many persons to various kinds of absolutism, while at the same time modeling a mutual acceptance of difference that goes beyond mere tolerance.

Jainism and the Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda have made definitive contributions to articulating and conceptualizing this particular feature of the Dharma Paradigm. The Jain tradition, with its doctrines of relativity—*anekāntavāda*, or

the complexity of existence, *nayavāda*, or the “doctrine of perspectives”, and *syādvāda*, or conditional predication—has articulated with great logical precision the model of unity in diversity with respect to truth that I have outlined in a very loose way here.

The metaphor of the Blind Men and the Elephant, utilized by Jains and Buddhists as well as by Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi, nicely captures the idea that all our perceptions of reality have legitimate differences, prior to reaching the enlightenment or awakening that leads to liberation, but that there is also such a thing as objective reality. An elephant is not a rope, a snake, or a tree trunk. It does have specific parts, though, that do resemble a rope, a snake, and a tree trunk, and that can be validly, although not ultimately correctly, perceived as such by those who grasp them. There is also a whole elephant really there that is the basis and foundation for all of these varying perceptions.

At the same time, those who are drawn to postmodern varieties of relativism are entirely correct to emphasize epistemic humility. Prior to enlightenment, the elephant as a whole remains a theoretical construct. All that most of us have are pieces—ropes, tree trunks, snakes, and so on. We may deduce logically that some kind of creature must be present to underlie all of these varied perceptions, as a corollary of metaphysical realism. But will this creature look just like an elephant? Or will it be a griffin? Or a gandharva? Will even our enlightened perceptions be entirely free from the limits of language if we try to communicate them?

An awareness and constant mindfulness of the fact that even the most insightful of us are still blind men may prevent us, we can hope, from absolutizing our piece of the overall picture, and from becoming that most terrible of self-contradictions: the Dharma fundamentalist. A conviction that some objective truth does underlie our perceptions can keep us from the kind of self-referential paralysis that is the danger of extreme relativism. But balancing this with epistemic humility is vital to our survival as a species^e. We may be convinced, and rightly, that the Dharma Paradigm is essentially and intrinsically true. But the moment this conviction prevents us from listening to and learning from the other, we have strayed from the path of Dharma.

Finally, I would add as a fourth feature of the Dharma Paradigm the fact that it is relatively non-anthropocentric. I say *relatively* because it is not the case that rebirth as a human being is in any way devalued by the Dharma traditions. On the contrary, it is not uncommon to find the affirmation in these traditions that rebirth as a human being is an essential prerequisite to the attainment of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. This is not a belief that I personally share^f. However, the basic point that distinctively human reality is to be cherished and in no way devalued is well taken.

My point, though, is that those beings with whom the Dharma traditions concern themselves—those beings whose liberation from rebirth they seek—include *all* beings. We have experienced rebirth in myriad forms, not limited to the human species, nor even to life on this planet^g. This awareness of the value of all life, of the fact that experience and interiority—and on some level, consciousness—is universal, gives rise to a deep ecological sensibility that is, in my opinion, vital to the survival not only of the human species, but of all life on earth^h.

The Dharma Paradigm, then, on my understanding, is a way of living and thinking that is rooted in: (a) the concepts of karma, rebirth, and liberation therefrom, (b) the set of five moral virtues enshrined in the *yamas* of the *Yoga Sūtra* and the *vratas* of

Jainism, (c) the principle of pluralism, or unity in diversity, that forms a middle path between the twin extremes of absolutism and relativism, and (d) a deep ecological sensibility informed by the concept of the universality of experience.

Why is the Dharma Paradigm important?

Having established what the Dharma Paradigm is, the next question that arises for us is, in the words of Rita D. Sherma, “Is the adoption of paradigmatic elements of the Dharma traditions *important/essential for a viable future for humanity?* (Sherma 2011)” As I have already said in my foregoing remarks, I believe that the answer to this question is an emphatic, “Yes!” As I have argued elsewhere, the adoption of the moral precepts of Jainism, even if not in the strict form that Jains practice them, would do much to ameliorate a wide range of crises currently facing humanity, from warfare, to the scarcity of resources, to climate change (Jeffery 2009b). As I have argued here, these are universal dharmic principles, and essential to the Dharma Paradigm as I have defined it here.

Similarly, as I have argued in my doctoral dissertation (Long 2000) and in numerous articles throughout my academic career, as well as in my first book, *A Vision for Hinduism* and in portions of my second book, *Jainism: An Introduction*, a pluralistic approach to truth, avoiding the extremes of absolutism and relativism, is essential to showing humanity the way out of the horrific and destructive “clash of civilizations” that has plagued us for many centuries, and whose destructive capacities have increased with our technological abilities (Long 2009c).

Finally, non-anthropocentric ways of thinking have long been acknowledged and affirmed by thinkers in the deep ecology movement as vital to mitigating the ecological crisis that is already well underway. And whatever other philosophical and theological arguments can be made for the cosmology of karma and rebirth, the non-anthropocentric emphasis of this cosmology is a factor in its favor.

The pragmatic question: promoting the Dharma Paradigm

If we have established that the Dharma Paradigm is, indeed, important to the future of life on earth, the question then becomes “How do we go about promoting it?” This of course involves other questions as well. How do we engage in this promotion in a way that does not allow for misappropriation, or that mitigates this possibility? How do we maintain the intellectual integrity of the Dharma traditions? And, to again quote Rita D. Sherma, how do we “carve out theoretical space for discourse on Dharma traditions, transcending our niches, to influence overall academic thought and discourse through these efforts, so that scholarship on Dharma is not constrained by the limitations of the conceptual structures of contemporary Western humanities? (Sherma 2011)”.

It is here that I propose to descend from the heights of the philosopher’s favorite activity of defining terms and engage with the practicalities of promoting this paradigm, as I understand it, and as I have outlined in my preceding remarks. Again, as I said in my introduction, my proposals here are based purely upon my experience of teaching Dharma traditions, primarily to undergraduate American college students, over the course of the last decade and a half. What practical steps can educators like myself take to promote the Dharma Paradigm?

Curriculum development

I had the privilege of presenting to an Uberoi Foundation-funded Dharma Symposium at the University of San Diego, developed and sponsored by Sthaneshwar Timalisina, in July, 2011. My presentation consisted of the syllabus and course proposal that I submitted to the Academic Council, the faculty body charged with approving curricular changes at Elizabethtown College, where I teach, for a course titled *Dharma Traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh*. This course evolved out of my growing frustration with the limits imposed by Western categories and assumptions about the Dharma traditions.

Specifically, I had observed over the years a pronounced difference between the students who took my course on Indic Religions, which focused primarily on Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and those who took my course on Buddhism (which also included coverage of indigenous Chinese traditions and Shinto). The students who were the most energized by the course material—those for whom studying these traditions was not just an intellectual exercise or a graduation requirement, but a way of satisfying a genuine and deep existential need—gravitated overwhelmingly toward my Buddhism course. On the other hand, those students who needed to fulfill a graduation requirement and who had no real interest in these traditions—who would otherwise not have taken a course from me at all—gravitated toward my Indic Religions course. This was, of course, due to the widely held positive stereotypes of Buddhism in America: a “cool”, non-dogmatic religion, and perhaps not even a religion so much as a philosophy or psychology or “way of life”, with a founding figure with a compelling life story, and fascinating contemporary celebrities, such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. Hinduism, on the other hand, was seen by most in terms calculated to repel those whose religious and cultural “default setting” was Protestant Christianity¹. Hinduism was, to paraphrase Rajiv Malhotra’s famous phrase, a religion of “caste, cows, and curry”, with multi-headed, multi-armed gods and goddesses and strange rituals out of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Jainism was altogether unknown, and Sikhism was conflated with Islam.

I am proud to say that by the end of both courses, students were disabused of their cultural stereotypes, at least for the most part. Hinduism was seen to be every bit as deep and “cool” as Buddhism, along with Jainism and Sikhism, and Buddhism to have a ritual dimension no less complex nor “exotic”, to a Western sensibility, than that of Hinduism. But the initial perceptions with which students took these courses did have a significant impact on the classroom experience, particularly early in the semester.

My new course, *Dharma Traditions*, combines the two earlier courses into one. It essentially forces students who are drawn to Buddhism to study other Dharma traditions along with it, in order to see how all of these traditions are intertwined, and to learn about the common ground that they share, as well as what makes each one distinct. Finally, it also engages the interactions of the Dharma traditions with Abrahamic traditions, such as Islam and Christianity, and with Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto.

This course acts as a prerequisite to higher studies that students wish to pursue with me in any of the four traditions, thus performing the role of gateway to a curriculum of Dharma study that includes Sanskrit and advanced courses on Indian philosophy, Hinduism in the West, and religion in China and Japan, with other courses still in the process of development (including study abroad in India).

My experiences thus far with this course have been overwhelmingly positive, and build upon the experiences I have already had as a teacher of Dharma traditions. I often ask my students an additional question on their course evaluation forms: “As a result of taking this course, I have a more positive attitude toward the traditions that I have studied in it”. Semester after semester, the answers to this question average between four and five (in other words, “agree” or “strongly agree”), with only one or two students in each semester giving a negative or neutral answer of one, two, or three. Enrollment in these courses tends to be full, which at Elizabethtown College means thirty-five students per course. Enrollment in *Dharma Traditions* was slightly less in the first semester of its offering, due, I suspect, to the fact that most students see the title of the course and do not know what it is. But on a small campus, I expect word to get around soon that this is essentially the new and improved version of my older courses.

The pragmatic lesson here is that instructors need to actively militate against the stereotypes and misconceptions of Dharma traditions by developing a curriculum that does this very thing, presenting these traditions in a more authentic fashion and on their own terms.

Course materials

Of course, even the most ingeniously developed curriculum runs into the problem of what to have students read, when so many textbooks reinforce the very stereotypes we seek to overturn. For many years, I sought to resolve this issue by supplementing my courses with my own materials, usually circulated in the form of class handouts. These gradually took on a life of their own, becoming full-blown course packets: books in their own right. At last, taking advantage of certain opportunities that came my way, I turned these materials into textbooks of my own, authoring a textbook on Jainism, as well as a reference work on Hinduism (published by Rowman and Littlefield), and most recently, a textbook on Indian philosophy, that I am still in the midst of writing. If we, as instructors, are not happy with the textbooks available to us, we need to write our own!

Another pragmatic suggestion, in addition to course development, is that we begin to coordinate our efforts—those of us who are committed to the Dharma Paradigm much as I have outlined it here—and bring these textbooks and reference works out in a series¹.

Working with Dharma communities

When writing *Jainism: An Introduction*, I took it as a basic principle that I should consult with leading members of the Jain community, particularly on controversial issues or on issues where I felt uncertain of my own knowledge base. To be sure, I did not surrender my academic freedom in this process. I never sought the *approval* of the Jain community before writing any part of my book. The work is mine, including the flaws it possesses. But it was important to me that my work represent the sensibility of the Jain community in a way that most, at least, would find recognizable and, at least to the degree possible for a non-Jain author (albeit a sympathetic one), authentic.

That I have succeeded in this regard has been evidenced for me by the fact that the International Summer School for Jain Studies, developed by Jains from a wide range of Jain communities, has seen fit to use my book as a required text in their curriculum, as well as inviting me to teach part of their course, which I was privileged to do in New Delhi in June, 2011. It seems that a relationship of trust and partnership between those who produce scholarship on the Dharma traditions and those who practice those traditions is essential to that scholarship leading to course materials that will present these traditions accurately and authentically, and thus in a way that will lead to a greater understanding of the Dharma Paradigm—again, on the assumption that Dharma speaks for itself and that an accurate, authentic, presentation is the best gift we can give for these traditions.

Endnotes

^aWhat is the distinction that I am making between proselytizing and promotion? At its most basic, I see proselytizing as a more aggressive activity than promotion, focused on the quantity of converts one can win over, rather than the quality of the experience available through the traditions one represents. Proselytizing is a demand, or at its worst, a command. Promotion is a subtle, perhaps even implicit, invitation.

^bDefining the Abrahamic and Secular paradigms (the latter of which is arguably an historical outgrowth of the former) is a task beyond the scope of this paper. It is hoped that the reader can presume that I refer here to the worldviews and values, on the one hand, promoted and shared by the Abrahamic religions, and on the other, the modern paradigm which places ultimate authority in reason and shared human experience.

^cSee (Long 2011).

^dFor a more detailed account of how the mahāvratas and anuvratas function in the lived experience of the Jain community, see (Long 2009a).

^eI owe the incorporation of this paragraph, and the added emphasis that it gives to epistemic humility in my project, to a conversation with Balbinder Bhogal, whose paper on this subject was presented at the Uberoi conference.

^fFor an extended reflection on the extent to which anthropocentrism does, indeed, manifest in the Dharma traditions, see (Gier 2000) I am deeply uncomfortable with anthropocentrism, and there are countervailing trends in the literatures of the Dharma traditions that question the normative privileging of human incarnation in these traditions, beyond what I mention in this essay. I am skeptical of the claim that non-human life forms are incapable of very high levels of spiritual attainment and believe there is some evidence to the contrary, though I do not have the time to go into this topic in depth here.

^gIndeed, recent advances in the detection of earth-like planets in other star systems are, it seems, likely to make something many of us simply believe to be true emerge as a settled scientific fact: extraterrestrial life.

^hAs with the cosmology of rebirth and the five virtues, the universality of consciousness is a Dharmic ideal that is compatible with a variety of ontological views, from classical idealism to Whiteheadian versions of panexperientialism. What, precisely, is meant by “consciousness” also varies in these varied accounts.

ⁱI owe this image and language to Pravrajika Vrajaprana.

^jI owe this suggestion to Veena Howard, who articulated it at the aforementioned San Diego symposium in July 2011.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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