

The Five Vidyas

The following article is more-or-less a chapter from my book on my life with H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III with additional material I found since *Thus Have I Seen: The Marvelous Buddha Dharma and Its Power to Transform*¹ was published in 2021.

I have finally come to realize that you must have an understanding of the Five Vidyas to begin to understand what our Buddha Master, H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III, tried to teach us. However, as of yet, very little of the discourses given by the Buddha Master on the Five Vidyas have been recorded or released for publication in English. I will try my best to offer what I have seen, heard, and understand about the Five Vidyas. Please understand that this has not been reviewed or approved by the Buddha.

The Buddha Master did spend considerable time trying to explain just what the five vidyas are and why it is important for us to realize that they represent everything that Bodhisattvas or holy beings do. They demonstrate the power and wonder of another existence that so surpasses what our puny minds can even imagine, that is no wonder it was hard for me, at least, to get it. I now see the Buddha Master's efforts to be similar to what He did in a previous incarnation as the great lay master, Venerable Vimalakirti, when He tried to show Shakyamuni Buddha's disciples that there was so much more than just being an Arahant.²

The five major vidyas are classified as 1) craftsmanship and sometimes also arts and/or technology (silpakarmasthanavidya), 2) healing (cikitsavidya), 3) sound (sabdavida), 4) causality or Buddhist logic (hetuvidya), and 5) inner realization (adhyatmavidya). A classic Buddhist education in India and later in Tibet would include training in all of these along with five minor vidyas with the minor vidyas being rhetoric, lexicology or ornate diction, phonology or prosody,³ dramatics or dramaturgy, and astronomy. Sometimes "vidyas" is translated as "sciences" or "knowledges" or "branches of learning," but that is not quite the right concept. H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III has explained, these five major categories are much more complex and subtle than the normally translated headings would suggest. To think of them as just five items or categories of knowledge would be incorrect. We would be wrong in our understanding of the Five Vidyas. Vidyas is an ancient Indian word that is used in many different contexts to mean different things. Taken literally, it represents the opposite of ignorance or misconception about

¹ *Thus Have I Seen: The Marvelous Buddha Dharma and Its Power to Transform: The Phoenix and the Chicken*, 2021, by Zhaxi Zhuoma Rinpoche.

² *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra* by Venerable Vimalakirti.

³ Prosody is the musical or metric structure of language. It can relate to versification and rhythm, but it is also the patterns of stress and intonation in a language, your manner of speaking or expressing yourself.

the nature of reality, which is avidya or darkness. You might say that vidya then represents the essential truth of everything or all that is bright and good. Actually, it is as Venerable Akou Lamo Rinpoche clearly stated in the book *H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III*, "... the Five Vidyas are not that narrow. Everything in the universe can be classified into five aspects of brightness and darkness. To develop everything that is good in the universe and that benefits living beings is classified as 'bright.' That which confuses and is bad is classified as 'dark.' This is the real meaning of the Five Vidyas of which the Buddha spoke."

The Buddha Master explained that the Five Vidyas in the Buddhist context represent the underlying principles of the universe. They are comprehensive and profound and totally encompass everything in the universe with life or without life, the spiritual and the material. Everything—all dharmas—are contained in the five vidyas. All animate and inanimate, conditioned and unconditioned phenomena in the entire universe are expressed in the five vidyas. It is essential that they be understood and mastered, if one is to obtain the full power of the Buddha-dharma. You could even say that they are the Buddha-dharma. That is because the Buddha-dharma includes all truth, including the truths of modern-day science. However, strictly speaking, these truths are not Buddhist truths or truths that belong to Buddhism. They are the underlying principles of truth and the original nature of all phenomena. They represent the entire interrelated Truth of the Universe. There cannot be a sixth vidya. There are only five and those five contain everything. That is why His Holiness has told us that it is heresy to refer to the five vidyas as merely five sciences or areas of knowledge or learning.

The Five Vidyas are the manifestation of the powers and wisdoms of holy beings—they represent the realization of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They are the results of what holy beings do and they include everything in the universe that helps living beings. The Chinese translated the Sanskrit "five vidyas" into "wu ming (五明)", which literally means the five brightnesses.⁴ This is really closer to their true meaning than the usual more prosaic English translation of sciences or knowledge and learning. The Chinese character for "ming" is composed of the ancient characters for the sun and the moon representing the source of all illumination. The principles expressed by these five categories contain the clarity of the true science of enlightenment. H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III often talks about this "brightness." Once He expressed concern that the improper transmission of the Buddha-dharma would cause the world to lose this light. That is why we must be so careful in transmitting this dharma. When one can understand these five principles, one understands everything and can do anything! I think it is best that we just use the Sanskrit term and do not try to translate it.

⁴ In Sanskrit a word can be negated by adding "a" to it, thus "vidya" or brightness becomes "avidya" or ignorance or absence of light.

“You must know that the true Five Vidyas are neither hollow theories from books nor the so called five major vidyas or five minor vidyas as defined by most Tibetans. The Five Vidyas refer to the mastering the rules of change that govern all spiritual and physical existence of myriad phenomena in the universe. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have acquired this mastery. What is not good, these holy beings turn into good. What is useless, They transform into usefulness. There are unimpeded in their power of debate. They know the correlation between science and logic, what are mutually constructive or mutually destructive. They turn afflictions into bodhi. They have attained liberation from death and rebirth and are at the pinnacle of transcending the mundane to become holy. They are greatly enlightened and capable beings who have attained accomplishments at the levels of Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas, Wondrous Enlightenment Bodhisattvas, or Buddha.”⁵

There is no one on this earth who has mastered these Five Vidyas like our Buddha Master. Others talk about it or may say they have, but where is the evidence of their mastery? It is not enough to express an abstract understanding or hollow theories about helping living beings. A true master must be able to demonstrate concrete results and skills in these areas. I think it took many of us a long time to understand why our Buddha Master talked so much about the Five Vidyas. We only had a superficial understanding of what was meant. I know I did. In fact, I had never even heard of the term before the Buddha Master started teaching us about them. The treasure book, the Big Blue Book, *H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III*, documents His mastery of the Five Vidyas.

The Buddha gave a number of discourses, both private and recorded for public distribution on the subject and still we were confused. I could find very little written about them in English, but bit by bit I began to understand their significance. I did find one reference on how an ancient ruler had wanted to convene a council of the most advanced followers of the Buddha to develop a common ground for understanding the dharma. He kept raising the bar as to who could attend to have only the finest practitioners present, but there were always too many. Finally, the criteria he used was to only admit those who had mastered the Five Vidyas and then he had a small number and they were the most advanced minds in his kingdom.

I did finally find an English translation of Master Asanga’s *Bodhisattvabhumi (The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment)* that at least mentioned the five branches of learning , but it was obviously with a greatly diminished definition. This is one of the volumes of the *Yogācārabhūmi Shastra*, the classic commentaries of the Yogacharya tradition. The Dalai Lama in his forward noted that this book not only outlines the practice of meditation and cultivation of the six paramitas, “...but encourages the acquisition of broad knowledge and general education in the pursuit of enlightenment. The focus of that education is the five sciences

⁵ World Buddhism Association Headquarters (WBAH) Reply to Inquiry #20190101, op.sit.

(vidyas), which include the study of Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical views, grammar, logic, medicine, and crafts” The translator of that book did offer a more detailed definition stating that “Learning the Dharma includes all five of the major branches of learning: (1) the inner sciences, (2) the science of logic (causality), (3) the science of grammar (sound), (4) the science of treating disease (healing), and (5) the science of the categories of crafts and occupations (craftsmanship or art and technology).” He also provided more detailed descriptions of what each of these five categories contained and how they contributed to the training of a Bodhisattva.⁶ Mastery of all five “categories” is required for one to become a bodhisattva just as much as accomplishment in the six paramitas. However, the understanding of these categories is nowhere near that provided by the Buddha Master.

Even given the narrower definitions of the five vidyas offered by Asanga, the *Bodhisattvabhumi* offers interesting motives on why a bodhisattva seeks to master the Five Vidyas or branches of learning:

- 1) For the arts and technology (crafts and occupations) there are three: amassing wealth to be able to easily benefit sentient beings; enable oneself to be held in high regard by sentient beings; and to be able to benefit sentient beings and attract them to the dharma by providing them with knowledge of a craft.
- 2) For healing (medicine) it is to be able to cure many varieties of illnesses contracted by sentient beings and to promote the welfare of the greater populace.
- 3) For sound (grammar) it is to generate trust in one’s speech or presentations and so that one can engage in orderly discourse.
- 4) For logic it is to gain an accurate and complete knowledge of what is incorrectly or poorly taught and/or described in the body of teachings; to be able to refute objections that are raised by others; and to instill greater faith toward the teachings of the Buddha.
- 5) For the inner science it is to learn and put into practice the Buddha’s speech and be able to fully reveal these teachings to others.

I do believe that it is partially the unavailability of the Yogacharya literature in English and the lack of emphasis on the Third Turning of the Wheel of dharma that has made it so difficult for western students to grasp the significance of the Five Vidyas and perhaps even having the

⁶ pp. 171-191, Asanga, *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment*, as translated by Artemus B. Engle, 2016.

karmic affinity for learning the dharma of H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III. I know that reading Engle's translation, which I did not do until I started writing my book, helped me to understand why my Buddha Master had stressed both cultivation and the development of the Five Vidyas, even with its limited definition of what the Five Vidyas were. We learn dharma in what we do—in everything we do: mundane and holy acts alike. Daily life off the cushion or meditation seat is just as important as our mind training on the cushion.

I did find another reference to in a commentary by Pabongka Rinpoche on a brief Lam Rim by Je Tsongkapa⁷ where there was a footnote definition given for the five sciences: Classical grammar, logic, Buddhist theory, the fine arts, and medicine. The use gave no indication of the depth or vastness of what these five categories represented or that they were the business or activity of holy beings— of powerful Bodhisattvas. My old roommate Venerable Akou Lamo Rinpoche said it so well, “the five vidyas are just what Bodhisattvas do.” Period!

When the World Buddhism Association Headquarters (WBAH) responded in 2019 to the inquiry I mentioned earlier, they also responded to a disciple who asked about some other Chinese students who were claiming to have received geshe degrees from a Buddhist academy in Tibet and that they had achieved the Five Vidyas upon passing a sutra debate. [They were told that obtaining a geshe degree “...does not mean that they possess true Buddha-Dharma because a geshe is merely a scholar of empty theories. The degree absolutely cannot represent the holder's accomplishment in true realization power. Only the written exam of 100 questions based on sutras, vinayas, and shastras and the most sacred and solemn holy exam can be ironclad proof of one's true knowledge and realization power.⁸]

This response also helps explain how diminished modern Buddhism is concerning what the Five Vidyas are and that they are not something that can be attained through sutra debates or scholarly discussions.

“The Five Vidyas are the results of true realization power, not a sliver of the true essence of the Five Vidyas can be obtained through empty debates. One has to truly present results that could (can) be seen. These results must be superior to the highest standards that experts can achieve.”⁹ The WBAH also comments on how misinterpreted the Five Vidyas are in Buddhism

⁷ *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*, Je Tsongkapa with commentary by Pabongka Rinpoche, translated by Geshe Lobsang Tharchin and Michael Roach, p 33.

⁸ World Buddhism Association Headquarters (WBAH) Inquiry # 20190101, December 1, 2019.

⁹ Op.cit. WBAH #20190101.

today in that they represent one single discipline and are limited to such pathetically simple matters like medicine, music, religious knowledge, crafts, etc.

The Craftsmanship Vidya, for example, "... is not just about being able to carve butter flowers, draw face masks, make Tangkas, create oil paintings, ink paintings, water-color paintings, pastel paintings, graphite sketches, wax crayon paintings, chalk paintings, or spray paintings, or make sculptures. Having accomplishment in all these aspects and surpassing experts of national standing still cannot be considered as having true Craftsmanship Vidya. There are infinite aspects to true Craftsmanship Vidya, which does not only include painting, but also construction, architecture, sand sculpting, decoration, landscaping, scenic creation, lighting design, styling of clothes including shoes and hats, hair styling and ornamentation, wall hangings, curtains design and patterned decorative windows, interior furniture and interior design, color decorations of pavilions, colorful gift wrappings, knotting and ribboning, and even one's mannerism including how one carries oneself when one walks and sits, and in one's dignified presence, etc. One must attain the level of an international expert in every single aspect. Simply speaking, only when one attains the highest level of enjoyment in all things of beauty in the universe can one be considered to have attained the Craftsmanship Vidya."¹⁰

This vidya is usually referred to as craftsmanship or art and technology, but the Buddha Master told us it is also much more. It not only includes the ability to create works of art, like sculpture or painting listed above, but also technological innovations and anything where you express yourself from making facial grimaces where you turn a frown into a smile to applying makeup to the clothes you wear. The Buddha Master warned us that to foolishly say that this only includes painting is wrong. "The craftsmanship vidya is much more than merely painting. If it were merely a craft like painting, then shouldn't Yun Sculpture not be part of the craftsmanship vidya? Shouldn't artistic sculptured landscape scenes also not be part of the craftsmanship vidya? Shouldn't the alteration and tailoring of clothing likewise not be part of the craftsmanship vidya? All of these are in fact part of the craftsmanship vidya. As I said a moment ago, haircutting or hairdressing is also part of the craftsmanship vidya. How a model walks on stage is part of the craftsmanship vidya. This is a type of artistic expression. Everything that is beautiful and artistic is included within the craftsmanship vidya. Whatever brings enjoyment and happiness to people is part of the craftsmanship vidya. Sitting in a dignified manner, as straight as a bell, totally conforming to the appearance of a member of the sangha, is also part of the craftsmanship vidya. The craftsmanship vidya contains the manifold changes. In short, things that embody that which is good and things of art are all part of the craftsmanship vidya. You must understand these things!"

¹⁰ Ibid.

H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III also told us that the craftsmanship vidya represents the two aspects of our outward expression and our spirit. Our spirit is included in the craftsmanship vidya. Take, for example, the case where someone's spirit is full. How is it full? Such a person is very self-confident. He feels that the expression of his spirit is very beautiful. This is also part of the craftsmanship vidya. Some actors in plays have stage fright. Although on the surface they very much appear to have craftsmanship, their spirit lacks craftsmanship. When some people take the stage, not only do they appear well, they are full of spirit. They think that they will certainly be the best. Their spirit is very full. This spirit is part of the craftsmanship vidya. This is extremely profound.

Another example is the Medicine or Healing Vidya, which is not just about curing human beings, animals and birds of their illnesses. "It also means having the ability to optimize conditions of and resolve the problems of living beings as well as inanimate objects. Only that can be considered the Medicine Vidya."¹¹ It is fixing anything that is broken and/or improving anything. It also includes anything where you take something coarse or rough and then refine or correct it. It includes everything where something goes from a bad state to a better state. The healing vidya includes all activities that improve a situation or thing. For example, revising a draft manuscript, repairing a clock, or any other revision, repair, alteration, or activity that raises the quality of something is part of this vidya. Anything that is refined or changed to be good is considered part of the healing vidya in this ancient way of understanding universal principles.

This vidya of sound or speech does not simply involve spoken or written words or singing. H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III once explained that singing is only part of the sound vidya. The sound vidya includes all types of sounds, such as the sound of breathing, the sound of an earthquake, the sound of an erupting volcano, the sound of a firearm, the sound of a gentle breeze in the forest, the sound of a roaring tsunami, the sound of an air whistle on a boat, the sound of buzzing insects, all of the intermingling sounds of nature within the universe such as the sound of flowing water; the sound of us debating, speaking, reciting literature; and so on and so forth. All sounds produced by everything that can produce sound that are pleasurable to living beings are included within the sound vidya. It can also involve hand gestures or other forms of communication. Broadly speaking, it also includes the ability to communicate with other species and types of living beings both on earth and beyond. His Holiness asked us how could you say that the sound vidya is simply spoken words? Such an interpretation is terrible! The sound of rain is part of the sound vidya. All delightful sounds and any sound that is beneficial to living beings emitted from animate beings or inanimate things compose the sound vidya.

I once asked His Holiness if a certain jazz musician who was so enthusiastic about His Holiness's calligraphy—who was attracted to the rhythms of the writing even though he knew no Chinese,

¹¹ Ibid.

maybe “heard” them? I was told, “Yes.” There is an energy that can be felt and heard as well as seen and that is expressed in the sound vidya.

On another occasion the Buddha Master explained the Vidya of Causality or Buddhist Logic. For example, this vidya is often translated as “logic” but it is not the logic of Western philosophy. It is the logic of the Law of Cause and Effect. Understanding this principle can enable you to see both past (causes) and future (effects). His Holiness pointed to a lamp and explained that the darkness and lightness of this lamp creates different karmic reactions. There is one effect if the lamp is lit and another if it is turned off. When the lamp is in different positions it also creates different effects. He also picked up a teacup and explained the cause and effect of drinking the tea. Taking the lid off a teacup is the cause. Vapor or steam arising from the tea is the effect. Taking the cup in your hand and bringing it to your mouth is the cause. Slaking your thirst is the effect. He has given many, many examples of how this principle works from the causes that result in a single hair falling to the collective karma of nations or groups of people that results in either prosperity or disaster. H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III told us that the causality vidya relates to all matters and all dharmas, all levels of conditional and unconditional phenomena, the entire logical relationship among them, the relationship of cause and effect, and so on. What the causality vidya covers is countless.

“... the Inner Realization Vidya is the summation of the other four Vidyas. Inner realization refers to that attainment of inner holy realization. The Vidya refers to the high-level manifestation of inner realization power such as inner realization power of physical body that is exuded from one’s appearance and that can be applied to external objects. One who has Inner Realization Vidya has transcended the ordinary and entered holy realm, and They can communicate directly with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They are extraordinary, wondrous and majestic to the utmost.”¹²

This vidya—the inner science is the hardest to understand and is unique to Buddhism. It is often defined as inner realization. For example, H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III can use his inner skills or realization to understand all things in the universe like the palm of his hand. This includes everything about all sentient beings and all things without consciousness (non-sentient). He was able to answer the question raised by me concerning the five vidyas by means of this inner science. His inner science skills are transformed into wisdom. He then used speech skills to deliver the answer. His Holiness has told us that the internal vidya refers to inner realization powers. The Buddha Master said that these inner realization powers are very deep. There are the inner-tantric initiations. At the highest level, this includes the magnificent, limitless, complete, and perfect enlightenment powers of the Buddha. It includes the ability to hide Mount Sumeru in a tiny mustard seed. All of this is part of the inner realization of the inner

¹² Ibid. 10.

vidya. Some people say, “This inner vidya is actually supernormal powers!” It includes the accomplishment state of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Such enlightenment and realization states are included within the inner vidya. Understanding one’s mind and seeing one’s original nature is a state of realization that is part of the inner vidya.

H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III explained that some acts are connected with more than one vidya. Take, for example, a barber or hairdresser. The act of cutting hair belongs to the craftsmanship vidya. However, taking a bad head of hair and fixing it up belongs to the healing vidya. For another example, a car breaks down. When a car repairman takes that broken car and fixes it, that is called the healing vidya. Yet another example is when there is a weather imbalance and it does not rain. A few projectiles are shot into the air that stir up [seeds] the clouds and cause rain. This method of handling the problem is a type of healing of the earth. It is also part of the healing vidya. Another example would be when problems arise during your meditation. You request the Master to point out where you are making mistakes and how to get on the right path. The Master’s instruction will cause you to visualize correctly and show you how not to be attached to phenomena. That is also part of the healing vidya. In short, the healing vidya includes that which is huge in the universe as well as that which is as minuscule as dust.

Thus, H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III told us that the Five Vidyas are not just five items of science or knowledge. Just casually select a tiny part of any of the Five Vidyas, and you will see that it contains thousands of scientific items. Isn’t labeling the Five Vidyas as the five sciences a form of trampling upon the Buddha-dharma? We should expose anyone in the present or past who spoke of the Five Vidyas in such way, whether he be a dharma king, great rinpoche, or great dharma master, for such a person cannot represent the mind-seal teachings of the Buddha. Mastery of the Five Vidyas is the perfect realization of the magnificent Buddha. It is a brilliant achievement that can be manifested. This is the Five Vidyas.

Only a very great dharma king or Buddha could understand and expound on these principles in their entirety. When H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III gave the impromptu discourses on which much of this chapter is based, the fortunate disciples who were present were radiant and extremely appreciative. These were very auspicious and wonderful occasions. I must humbly offer my apologies and beg forgiveness for what I captured from the translation of those magical moments, but I felt they were so wonderful that I wanted to share them with others, even though I am sure this account inadequately expresses what was said.

The Buddha Master demonstrated accomplishment in all of the activities identified by Asangha, but so much more. This just told me that it is not that what other religions offer or what we have now in Buddhism are so much wrong, but so incomplete. It shows how much we have lost of the power of the true Buddha-dharma and why H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III came back to this world to show us that power. Different Buddhist sects and also certain non-Buddhist groups

understand some aspects of these vidyas, but only a Buddha can understand these universal truths in their entirety. This knowledge was the Buddha's awakening—His "Enlightenment." These five principles existed before the coming of the Buddha and were not changed or altered by the arrival of the Buddha. However, the Buddha was able to comprehend the inner-most truth of these principles and thus gain their power. That is part of what is meant by the term Buddha-dharma. "Dharma" is a Sanskrit term that can have different meanings in different contexts. It is usually thought of as the holy teachings of the Buddha (sometimes capitalized as "Dharma"), but it is also used to mean all phenomena or the universal principles underlying all phenomena. When you understand the meaning of Buddha-dharma, you can see that these meanings are not different.

Achievements in the Five Vidyas represent the highest accomplishments in the Buddha-dharma, and the highest comprehension of both the conditional and unconditional worlds. They are what holy beings do, pure and simple—they represent the realization of holy beings. How could anyone be called a holy being who could not show mastery in at least some of the Five Vidyas? Buddhist books tell us about the accomplishments that a true vajra master must possess. They mention that an accomplished one should excel in all Five Vidyas, yet most who claim to be masters cannot demonstrate proficiency in all of these areas. Even the famous historic dharma kings have not reached the levels manifested by H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III. In the current world there are certainly no others who can reach this level! He is able to obtain the help of the devas and the dharma protectors at any time to help him with his work. These devas and dharma protectors can accomplish things at thousands of times the speed of ordinary human beings. Some of H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III's works of art would have taken decades to be completed by conventional means, yet His Holiness can turn out masterpieces in only a few hours or sometimes even a few minutes. I know. I have seen His Holiness start a work of art and I have come back a few hours later and seen a completed masterpiece. Some of H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III's art-work resembles withered vines or petrified wood or ancient coral that would have taken thousands of years to produce, yet when His Holiness called the deities to help, they aged in a matter of minutes.

When I first introduced H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III's achievements at an exhibition in Southern California in 2006, I started by saying that everything that was seen—all 200 examples of 18 different categories of work—were from the Buddha-dharma. H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III is an extremely accomplished artist, poet, writer, inventor, etc, because He has complete realization of the Buddha-dharma. His manifestation of prajna wisdom or the various vidyas as seen in his art and innovations exceeds that of any other dharma king in history. And these exhibits were only a very small sampling of the creative genius of this great being! They did not include His Holiness's work as a healer, nor accomplishments in the martial arts, nor his musical achievements, nor his holy writings and discourses, etc.—all of which are considerable.

Although I used those words to introduce my Buddha Master, I did not yet know He was a Buddha, nor did I really understand the truth of what I had said or anything about the Five Vidyas.

It is important to realize that this mastery and very high level of accomplishment is available to all who learn and practice the correct Buddha-dharma.

I remember what Penor Rinpoche told me in 2008: “my master was much higher than he was and that it was a good thing that such a high being should incarnate in these dharma-ending days. He also said that such a being should demonstrate many miracles and supernatural powers so that people would believe in the power of the Buddha-Dharma.” Now I understand what he meant.

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