

# 山門寺

## Mountain Gate Journal

Spring 2023

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Mountain Gate is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established to provide the environment and training in the specific mindfulness practices of Rinzai Zen, focusing on meditation and work with koans [traditional paradoxical anecdotes or questions]. Regaining Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate some years ago to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, and for women who are wives or partners of veterans with PTSD.

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### Integrating Zen Into Daily Life

The great Japanese Rinzai Zen master, Hakuin Ekaku, as well as his premier Dharma Successor, Torei Enji, emphasized the importance of bringing the insights resulting from our Zen practice to life in our daily work-a-day world, vacations, Starbucks drive-throughs, and so on—literally, everything we do. In his Treatise on the Inexhaustible Lamp of Zen, written when he was thought to be terminally ill, Torei wrote pointedly of what he called The Long Maturation. This is the little-mentioned aspect of Zen practice in which we work on living fully what we increasingly realize through our work on the cushion, instead of simply being driven by our conditioning and the habit patterns of behavior that resulted from that conditioning.

When I was living and training at the Rochester Zen Center, the importance of working from our *hara—tanden*, belly—was emphasized, and that is quite important. The format developed for practice was the best that could be found back then, and given how many people had to be accommodated during sesshin, was effective. Eyes down, no conversation—no talking at all, except as appropriate in dokusan—zazen Soto Sect style, facing the blank wall or divider: It worked to drive the practice deeper. But there was a down side to that form. Essentially, in the interest of bringing our practice as deep as possible, we were put into a sensory deprivation chamber. But then at the end of seven days in that limited sensory environment we returned

to the world of family, job, traffic, grocery shopping, television, phone calls—and for most of us it was like being dropped off the edge of a cliff. It reminded me of when, after living nearly three years in Myanmar, two of which were in Mandalay where, despite the then-population count being 300,000 there were only fourteen motorized vehicles in the city, one of which was the Consulate Jeep, and the city went to sleep at 8 o'clock at night, our first stop on the way home was Hong Kong. The wide, traffic filled avenues were frightening to even attempt to cross. And then—after living in 115-degree weather in the tropics—we landed in Chicago in January. It was intense.

After 20 years of training in Rochester, I went to Okayama, Japan, to continue my intensive training at Sogen-ji. There, it was a different experience, and my “background koan” was, these two premier training centers—the Rochester Zen Center and Sogen-ji Zen Temple—were both strong, effective teaching centers, both with intensive training schedules; how could I integrate the best of both at Mountain Gate? Initially at Sogen-ji people chatted, there were not the changes of rooms standard for sesshin at Rochester, although all the women were assigned a different room at the beginning of each new training period in Japan. (The men lived in the zendo, and except for those holding the positions of jikijitsu or jisharyo there was no change in housing.) The temple was originally (300 years ago) far away from towns and cities, but by the 20th century it faced the hustle and bustle of a large

Japanese city, Although it backed up against an unpopulated mountain, local mothers brought their toddlers to an area just inside the main gate to play in the morning; people often passed through on their way to the hiking trails up the mountain, sometimes peering into the zendo and having to be asked not to enter. At certain times of the year when there were sales in local stores, a plane would circle overhead with a loudspeaker announcing the sales. At other times when there was an upcoming election, cars mounted with loudspeakers would drive slowly through the surrounding neighborhoods announcing the name of a politician who was running for office, followed by “Thank you!” in Japanese, over and over again. Daily, at 5 pm, the City of Okayama played a city-wide loudspeaker that often featured songs such as “Home On the Range” to let people know it was that time of day. During the aftermath of the Kobe Earthquake, neighborhood loudspeakers were constantly for weeks afterwards announcing the names of people who had died in that massive temblor.

In addition, even if none of that was taking place, the duties of the various Zen trainees assigned to the *tenzo*—cook—position and their assistants each different day of sesshin, or the *densu*—the lead chanter and their assistant during a given training period—each continued their duties during sesshin. At Sogen-ji, whoever was the cook of the day—and there is a different one each day—was first to sanzen in the morning (after morning sutra chanting ended and they had set up the sanzen waiting area and the sanzen room) and first as well in the evening (prior to mopping the kitchen floor and cleaning up the kitchen). In between, they answered the telephone, received people who came to the business entrance bearing donations or asking the way to the old graveyard, etc., and still had to get two meals on the table on time for as many as 50 people. The densu and their assistant left the zendo each Sunday morning, in or out of sesshin, to lead chanting and zazen in the *hondo* for the 85 or so local folk who came to *zazenkai* each Sunday. Then they returned to sesshin in

the zendo and of course also went to sanzen.

Another point of difference was the Rinzai form, in which, rather than facing a blank wall, everyone sat facing those sitting across the zendo, which was long and narrow, with two tans—sitting platforms—opposite each other one along each of the long walls in the zendo. There were large windows all along the sides, behind the seats of the sitters.

In other words, there was a lot of constant input, constant change for everyone, whether or not they were in sesshin. So there was no coming out of a cloistered environment and moving back into daily life because daily life was continuously happening regardless of sesshin. What I observed was that, when I first arrived at Sogen-ji, only a few years after Harada Roshi had begun to teach, the other residents were not initially as deep in their practice as people would go during sesshin at the RZC. But as time went on—in the midst of activity—they were becoming more and more **solidly** deep.

Over more than twenty years at Mountain Gate, the background koan has revealed it's answers in changing ways. And change is part of what it's about. When Roshi Kapleau taught a few sesshin at Bodhi Mandala (now called Bodhi Manda) in the Jemez Mountains of northern NM in summer, there was no sticking with the RZC form. At the very least, wild and thunderous storms raced up the canyon every afternoon and evening, hurling insects at our faces as we waited outside on the covered deck for dokusan. The monsoon rain pelted us at the same horizontal angle. June bugs filled our beds, such as they were, and the Bodhi women, who did not vacate during our sesshin as they had their own quarters, would come down sometimes during the work period, unabashedly strip naked and slide into the hot springs on the property. Roshi Kapleau often began sesshin in Rochester with an admonition against “doing business as usual” as we sat zazen; at Bodhi it was impossible. And the result? Suddenly, people who had been

to countless sesshins in Rochester were breaking through, passing their first koan and diving into deeper practice—which did not disappear once the sesshin ended.

Hakuin had famously announced that “Practice in the midst of activity is 10,000 times more effective than seated zazen.” It is more difficult to maintain focus—more about this later—when our body is active, but stick it out and it makes an enormous difference in your daily life.

So at Mountain Gate we sit in the Rinzai form, two tans on opposite walls in the zendo. Talking during sesshin is not encouraged but it is not forbidden; there are none of the ubiquitous pads and pencils that appear during sesshin at the RZC. Especially during times when our local neighbors were doing construction here on the building addition they would be invited to lunch and we would temporarily abandon use of the traditional *jihatsu* (set of nested bowls & chopsticks) and eat with plates and bowls and forks and spoons, chatting amiably with these kind and generous people.

In light of this latter example, there is a teaching story in Japan that features an abbot/Zen teacher who was invited to a local family’s home for a meal. He brought along a young monk as his attendant. As the master sat and joked and laughed with his hosts and their family, the young acolyte went off in a corner and sat zazen. Following the evening event, master and disciple returned to the temple. But along the way, the master berated his attendant for going off and sitting zazen that evening. Perhaps you can understand why?

At the same time, at Mountain Gate, when we are sitting in the zendo, we are fully concentrating on our practice, opening and exploring our mind, reaching deeply in search of understanding, in search for the Truth. As it was in the earlier days at Sogen-ji before Harada Roshi became so widely known and people began to flock to Sogen-ji, everyone in the zendo when sanzen is

offered is required to come to sanzen. We work on koans—as is also done in Rochester—in the same Rinzai way they are worked on at Sogen-ji, which is so well known and highly respected in Japan that there have been many national television specials done on the temple and its large population of serious students from all over the world.

Our practice at Mountain Gate does not end when we exit the zendo after a sitting; we are continuously encouraged to become increasingly aware of our thoughts, speech and actions, and through that as well to open even more completely to that vast mystery that is Life. The schedule is flexible and has time for private activities—we share a boundary with the Carson National Forest and people training at Mountain Gate regularly go for afternoon walks or longer hikes in that beautiful landscape, usually accompanied by our Great Pyrenees dog and protector, Boo. On a recent Saturday morning the three of us who were here at the time climbed into a car and drove to Santa Fe to exercise at a local gym or swim at one of the city’s pools. (The Genoveva Chavez Center has an Olympic size pool as well as an indoor ice skating rink, weight room, vast children’s pool with slides, waterfalls and other fun water things.)

The zendo is open at all hours and yaza—late night, informal meditation—is encouraged. In other words, encouragement to practice both “in the midst of activity” as well as engage in serious, zendo-based, grounding practice—all of this and the activities mentioned above, is the expressed answer to that background koan. Life is short. As the Tibetan’s are fond of saying, we don’t know when the hour of our death will arrive. What we can realize through dedicated Zen practice is nothing short of full liberation—the kind of freedom that means we are free even if we are in the midst of a hell realm. May we all realize that true liberation!



## Fundamental Tweaks to Aid Your Zen Practice

These offerings are, of course, meant to support your Zen meditation, not to replace it.

Fundamentally, practice depends upon attention, focus, and awareness—and the perplexity that is the hallmark of koans as well as what is behind what brings many of us to Zen. These are not so easy to come by in this modern age full of technological “advances,” dings on our cell phones, notifications even on our watches, popups on our computer screens, as well as endless, often mindless but somehow addictive, “searches” that take us down a rabbit hole and eat up hours from our day. Stress, irritation, road rage, depression are on pretty much everyone’s radar. For so many people these days, life is a fractured, exhausting experience of too much to do, not enough time, and too many interruptions.

It wasn’t always like this, and those of us who are old enough—which these days means pre-TV, pre-personal computers—can remember a quieter, more simple time when things went along at a more sedate pace and stress was much less prevalent. It was a time when people read actual books, physically turning the pages. There was a slower, more sedate pace to life.

We can return to a semblance of that relative calm with some simple steps, and these steps will not only enhance our life but also our Zen practice. We can start by—as is advised by sleep experts—shutting off our screens, and that means computers, tv’s, tablets, phones—at least an hour before bedtime. Better, do that before you eat dinner! (It’s easy to mindlessly eat our way to overweight if not obesity by watching tv or scrolling on our phones while we eat.) Right with that we are offering ourselves an option to simply be, without electronic distraction

at least. This is not so easy for people these days. It may be anxiety-producing for some; if it is, recognize how addicted you are to that flashing screen, and that there are likely to be some withdrawal symptoms. But your life—and your practice—will benefit from remaining committed to letting go the electronic distractions for some hours every day. You will also sleep better and likely awake more refreshed.

Before falling asleep, do some *metta* [loving-kindness] meditation. It’s fine to fall asleep while doing so. But as you slide into that subtle space between wake and sleep, be curious, open, and allow your awareness to expand and sink deeply into the unknown. This as well will benefit your practice in major ways. That time between wake and sleep is a fertile ground for letting go the usual dialogue that drives our self-image and opening to at least the edges of this great mystery we call life..

Beginning to wake up in the morning offers another opportunity to subtly open into deeper awareness in that space between sleep and wake. Allow yourself the gift of presence in those precious moments, and that will benefit your upcoming day in many ways, as well as your Zen practice.

“Take time to smell the roses.” Don’t jump right into breakfast with the tv on; don’t immediately start scrolling on your phone. Take that precious time to savor some coffee or tea, look out the window and take in the scenery, listen to the sounds outside. Get out into the sunshine and just stand there and soak it in (with sunscreen on; be prudent). The more fully you tune into the moment just as it is, the greater benefit, again, to your day, to your life, and to your Zen practice.

During the day, whenever there is a transition—a bathroom break, standing up and

stretching at your computer, going for a drink of water—stop briefly and do a single long, extended outbreath, with full presence of your inner energy and with that “openness to possibility” that is an essential part of the search for your True Self. Even just one single breath, if it’s with the fullest attention you can give to it, will provide a healthy, stress-relieving micro-vacation that will re-energize you and help support the rest of your day.

When you return home after your day at the office, if you work in an office, stop at your front door, look around, and breathe deep. Notice your environment, focusing on each sense: hearing, sight, the sense of temperature and pressure on your skin, and any inner energy sense. Then open your door, walk in, and move into the next step of your day.

If you work from home, at the end of the work day, go outside! Go for a walk or a run, and do the same: What does the air feel like? What does it smell like? What sounds are there and what is the quality of those sounds?

And of course, do some zazen. If you can sit half an hour every morning and every evening, wonderful! If you can do an hour in one or both of those time slots, so much the better! Your practice will benefit greatly both from utilizing these tweaks, and also from deepening commitment to JUST the practice when on the cushion or in the chair. Multi-tasking has been shown to be a myth, and adds more fracturing to our life when we try to do it. The more you can be fully present in each moment—including the uncomfortable ones—the deeper your practice will go and the greater your entire life will benefit.

When we are surrounded by the rapidly changing screens that psychologically demand our attention, we are literally training our brain to not be able to focus for more

than a few seconds at a time; this is a proven fact. We are training it to be highly vulnerable to distraction. The trade-off is a kind of flattening of life experience, living in not 50 but maybe 5 shades of gray. And we wonder why we feel unfulfilled, depressed, like something is missing. Something IS missing: full immersion in the incredible richness of life, accessible only when we pay FULL attention. Our difficulty in doing meditation practice stems from this conditioning. But persist in your extended outbreath practice; it will make a big difference. Not only does it train us to pay attention for longer periods of time, it also grounds us. In addition, it trains us not to be so vulnerable to distraction. And it helps us reach a deeper, more open way of being. And in reaching that greater openness and presence we will find ourselves experiencing everyday life with a greater richness.



*It’s not about the meditation per se or the practice it’s about being truly in touch.*

— Anonymous



*Prajna is the word around which Mahayana Buddhism formed in the Kushan Empire of Northwest India, Pakistan and Afghanistan just before the beginning of the Christian Era. It means “what comes before knowledge” and refers to our original mind undefiled by discrimination or what passes for knowledge: Adam and Eve before the apple, religion before religion, the mind before mind. In a word, prajna means “wisdom.” And adding the word paramita distinguishes it as “ultimate wisdom” or “the perfection of wisdom.” It’s the cultivation of such wisdom that enables a person to see things as they are, empty of self-existence and inseparable from the mind that conjures them into existence.*

—pp. 7-8, *Zen Baggage*, by Bill Porter

## Transformation: The heart of practice

*The following article was written by a senior student of Mountain Gate. She has been practicing here intensively since Mountain Gate was founded in 1969.*

Many people struggle with habits that are causing pain and suffering, whether these habits involve our physical, psychological, or spiritual well-being. Sometimes we recognize change needs to happen and know exactly how to do it and have no trouble enacting that change, but sometimes we aren't sure where to start, or it just seems daunting. The following are tips that might be helpful in opening to the process of change wherever you may find yourself in the process itself!

How do we know if we need to make a change? How do we know what changes to make? Often we have a niggling sense, or a small voice in the back of our mind, nudging us toward change. As Zen practitioners, this might manifest in a sense that we could benefit from more formal sitting, or more moments of mindfulness and questioning during our daily lives off the cushion. Or maybe we have a sense that we need bigger changes in our practice, like making more significant commitments for formal Zen training in whatever way feels right to us.

What if we have a sense that change is needed but aren't sure how it should manifest? Tuning into that small voice inside, or that non-verbal sense, can help us to connect with the desire and motivation to change, as well as to open to a clearer sense about the specific change we want to make. Journaling, using the Felt Sense, and creative, artistic exploration can help reveal what our intuition is trying to tell us.

How do we get started? Getting in touch with our motivation for change can help kickstart change. Asking ourselves what motivates and inspires us, is a good place to start. If the goal is to practice more mindfulness throughout the day,

consider what may be rewarding about that. Are we excited to take a moment to really hear bird songs in our back yard, or the wind in the trees? What about the laughter of loved ones nearby? If the goal is to sit longer hours each day, what inspires us to do this? Is it to experience a more settled, grounded state of mind each day? Is it to come to deep Awakening? Reminding ourselves of our motivation can help us work toward change. Writing down our inspiration and posting it in a place we will see it each day can help.

What if it feels overwhelming to make the changes we know we want to make? There are a number of techniques that can help us jump into a new pattern when we are ready. We can break a big pattern change into small, do-able chunks. For example, if we want to start sitting 2 hours each evening, and we currently are sitting for 15 minutes, try just adding 15 minutes for a few days and slowly increase. Adding one new habit onto another existing habit is one of the best ways to make change. If we normally don't sit in the morning and we want to add that into our day, consider a reward for following through with the new intention. Perhaps a really nice coffee or tea, mindfully enjoyed, could serve as a reward and motivation to start a new habit.

Making new habits is hard, and we naturally are going to struggle with consistency. Holding ourselves with grace and compassion can help mitigate negative judgements we tend to heap on ourselves when we don't follow through as perfectly as we think we should. Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, solid motivation and a bullet-proof, 120-point plan to change, it can still feel impossible to make changes! Keep trying!

Leaning into that feeling of impossibility is key to moving through it. Opening fully to that blockage is the way to freedom from it. What does the blockage feel like? What IS that massive boulder in the path? If we can explore what might be underneath it, or within it, or beyond it, we can start to understand it. Is it fear? Pain? Sadness? Grief? Are there specific feelings or thoughts

associated with it?

Ultimately, there are no barriers to letting go and fully transforming, so anything that seems to be blocking our way CAN be dissolved by this process of fully opening to its inner essence, becoming one with it. It takes bravery to do this. Often, we have conditioned states of mind that are deeply entrenched, that seem to block us from moving forward. If we bravely stop and open to whatever comes up, we can, little by little, free ourselves from ANY inner obstacles. Essentially any perceived blockage, even if it seems like an external problem is really linked to an internal sense of blockage or attachment. Once that internal blockage is fully seen through and let go, the external blockages clear themselves away.

Often when we are in the midst of working to open to this sense of blockage, it can take a LONG time. Sometimes it can feel like nothing is happening, no matter how hard we try to work through it, and that's where faith comes in. Faith that we CAN do it, no matter how hard it feels, no matter how long it takes. It can help to remind ourselves of the many other people, past and present, who have had to slog their way through difficult patches in practice. Perhaps there is a teacher or student who inspires us, knowing they have been through similar difficulties. After all, there's NOTHING in our way, even though it seems like it!

Most importantly, judging our apparent progress, or lack of progress in making change, just makes it harder. It's helpful to remember that the act of making a sincere effort is what erodes patterns of conditioning and attachment, and over time, this makes massive changes in our daily experience of freedom. It is not different from the six-million-year process of erosion that created the beautiful Grand Canyon. We work, moment after moment, year after year, lifetime after lifetime, to attend to Life itself, and to question: What is this? And this? And this? Before we know it, we break through our conditioned mind, and we see who we really are. We are suddenly free, and

then we continue to further deepen and further open in each moment: just this, just this, just this.



**MOUNTAIN GATE**  
Sanmonji



*We are very grateful for your support. Thanks to your vital donations, we are able to provide daily meditation sittings, meditation retreats, residential training, and free nonsectarian RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD.*

*In these stressful times, Mountain Gate offers a peaceful refuge for Zen practice and an opportunity for deep personal growth. Some students in residence have reflected:*

*"The ability to live in a concentrated practice environment--especially here, in this peaceful mountain village--provides the opportunity to do deep work in a focused way. I've learned a lot of real-world skills I never would have otherwise, as well as met many wonderful and generous people both in our Sangha and in the community. Here practice is embedded in the midst of everyday life." - J. Z.*

*"This environment is very intimate, and thus you have regular interactions with the teacher all the time... You are able to channel your energy and settle the mind, and to realize things that normally you cannot see directly." - A. A.*

*While the Dharma is always free, there are considerable costs involved in keeping our programs running. Mountain Gate operates in the traditional way, surviving almost entirely on donations to cover electricity, heating, water, repair & maintenance, and food. As a result, we are asking for your continuing support in helping us meet these ongoing expenses. We are urgently working toward rebuilding the Kannon-do, our annex building which has fallen into increasing disrepair. To concentrate our resources we focused on expanding our main building beyond its very small, basic level as we experience more interest in our programs. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to all who helped us over the six years it took to build that addition.*

*Here are three options to donate to help support Mountain Gate (copy and paste these links):*

*<https://www.sanmonjizen.org/donations.html>*

*<https://www.regainingbalance.org/donate.html>*

*<https://www.classy.org/give/429825#!/donation/checkout>*

*Sincerely, with gratitude, Mountain Gate Sangha*

## CALENDAR

**April 8-15 7-day sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Because the October-November dual sesshins provided such an enhanced and successful zazen intensive, particularly to everyone who remained at Mountain Gate through both sesshin, we have scheduled these upcoming 7-day sesshins in similar close proximity. (This April sesshin is the second in a double, with March sesshin being the first part of this very effective practice period. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

**May 27 - June 3 7-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin.

**June 17-24 7-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

**July 12-15 - RegainingBalance Retreat® for Women Veterans with PTSD.** This is not a sesshin, but a special, free, nonsectarian retreat for women veterans with PTSD. If you'd like more information: [www.regainbalance.org](http://www.regainbalance.org)

**August 6, 9 am - 4 pm Zazenkai** at Mountain Gate. Participants can attend the morning (9 am to noon, with guided LovingKindness meditation) and/or afternoon (1 pm - 4 -m, with teisho) by Zoom, or, if fully vaccinated including the bivalent booster, in person. If you would like to attend in person, please apply by emailing to [mountain-gate1@gmail.com](mailto:mountain-gate1@gmail.com). Please bring a bag lunch if attending in person. Cost: \$20 per section, or \$35 for the full day.

**August 16-20 - RegainingBalance Retreat® for Women Veterans with PTSD.** This is not a sesshin, but a special, free, nonsectarian retreat for women veterans with PTSD. If you'd like more information: [www.regainbalance.org](http://www.regainbalance.org)

**September 6-10 - RegainingBalance Re-**

**reat® for Women Veterans with PTSD.**

This is not a sesshin, but a special, free, nonsectarian retreat for women veterans with PTSD. If you'd like more information: [www.regainbalance.org](http://www.regainbalance.org)

**September 30 - October 7 7-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

**October 21- 28 7-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

**November 4-11 7-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

**November 30- December 8 Rohatsu 8-day Sesshin** at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. *Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.*

*Please note that the October and early November sesshin are also just a week apart. This offers another opportunity to give yourself a big "shot-in-the-arm" to your Zen practice. It is not anywhere near as difficult as it may seem, as when there are two sesshin in such close proximity there's not really a chance to come down from the first before heading into the second. This allows your practice to plunge deeper more easily. It is a known advantage, and one that is utilized at Sogen-ji in Japan as well as at Mountain Gate, to great benefit!*

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*For information about the RegainingBalance program and to offer support: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org)  
For information about Zen meditation practice and sesshin [meditation retreats]: [www.sanmonjizen.org](http://www.sanmonjizen.org)*

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