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## A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE CONTROVERSY OF ABHIDHAMMA ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL AND TRADITIONAL APPROACH

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**Abstract** This research provides a critical examination over the controversy surrounding the history of Abhidhamma based on historical background and written tradition. It is a library research which was done by collecting and scrutinizing data from the Tipitaka and its commentaries, combined with articles and books written by Buddhist scholars. Abhidhamma which is traditionally understood as higher teaching taught by the Buddha, reveals controversies among Buddhist scholars. They questioned the historical authenticity of Abhidhamma as the words of the Buddha, since they found several incompatibilities when looking at the historical background of the development of Buddhist literature. *Kathāvatthupakkaraṇa*, one of the seven books of Abhidhamma Pitaka, is strong evidence that the book was compiled by Ven. Mogaliputtatissa Thera in the end of the third Buddhist council long after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha. However, the written tradition as reported in the commentaries asserts that Abhidhamma should be accepted as Buddhavacana. Bhikkhu Buddaghosa Thera in his commentaries consistently tried to highlight the Abhidhamma as higher teachings that should be acknowledged as Buddhavacana. This research sheds light on how the history of Abhidhamma is perceived on through the lenses of history and written tradition.

**Keywords** Abhidhamma; Historical Approach; Traditional Approach

## INTRODUCTION

Abhidhamma is generally translated into English as 'higher teaching'. It is normally understood as the analytical exposition on the teaching of the Buddha. In the *Atthasālini*, it is defined as that which exceeds and distinguished from the Dhamma (DhsA. 2). According to traditional standpoint, it is believed that Abhidhamma was preached by the Buddha himself to his mother who was born as deity and other deities in the *Tavatīṣṭha* heaven. Afterward, the summary of teachings was transmitted to Ven. Sariputta Thera and his disciples (DhsA. 14-17). Tradition believes Abhidhamma as Buddhavacana or the Buddha's own word. The legend relates the story that after the enlightenment, the Buddha spent the fourth week in the Ratanaghara, revolving his mind the intricate doctrine of the Abhidhamma (J. I. 78). However, as historically reported, after the Buddha's passing away, when the first council was held to collect all the Buddha's teachings, only Dhamma and Vinaya were recited. Abhidhamma was not mentioned, and it indicates that Abhidhamma

did not form a separate Pitaka. Cullavagga Pāli of Vinaya Piṭaka reports that the whole of Dhammas were settled by Ven. Ānanda and the whole of Vinayas were settled by Ven. Upāli (Vin. II. 286). In the Third Buddhist Council, Kathāvatthupakkaraṇa composed by Ven. Mogaliputtatissa Thera was added into the collection of Abhidhamma Pitaka. Nevertheless, in the commentaries, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thero convinced in various ways that Abhidhamma to be accepted as the words of the Buddha. The controversy over the historicity of Abhidhamma is an interesting topic to be dealt with. This paper aims to critically examine the controversy of Abhidhamma according to historical and traditional approach.

## METHODS

The research methodology employed in this research is a library research. Library research is a type of study that is closely associated with the analysis of texts or discourses to investigate an event, whether it is an action or a written work. This research aims to obtain accurate facts, such as discovering origins, the true underlying causes, and so forth (Hamzah, Amir. 2020: 7). It is a method of obtaining information by utilizing the facilities available in a library, such as books, magazines, documents, historical records, or pure bibliographic research related to the research subject (Mahmud. 2011: 31). The data used in this research was collected from primary sources and secondary sources. The Pali Canon and its commentaries, including Sri Lankan chronicles, are considered as primary sources. The research articles, journals, and books written by scholars are considered as the secondary sources. With this library approach, information from the sources was gathered, examined, and come with conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Definition of Abhidhamma

The term Abhidhamma can be defined into three ways, namely referring canonical text (Tipiṭaka), its commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā) and the modern scholars' point of views. Canonical text is Tipiṭaka consisting Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka. While for the commentaries, consist of the commentaries of Tipitaka and also other Pali literatures such as Sri Lanka chronicles. Scholars' ideas on Abhidhamma is also useful to know the meaning of Abhidhamma.

#### *Definition of Abhidhamma according to Canonical Texts (Tipiṭaka)*

The word "Abhidhamma" can be found in the Canonical texts. For example, in the Mahāvagga, the word 'Abhidhamma' occurs with the word 'Abhivinaya' (Vin. I. 64). Abhidhamma mentioned here doesn't indicate any Abhidhamma texts of Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Abhidhamma and Abhivinaya occur together because these are the necessary teaching should be known by monks. According to Oldenberg, the only passage in the Vinaya which really presupposes the existence of Abhidhamma Pitaka is one in the Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga. It is said that if a nun, having asked for permission to put a question regarding to the Suttanta, would do so in regard to the Discipline or the Abhidhamma, there is an offence of expiation. Oldenberg assumed that this passage is to be an interpolation.

In the *Anāgatabhaya* Sutta, the word Abhidhamma occurs as 'Abhidhammakatham̄ vedallakatham̄' which is translated as 'A talk pertaining to teaching and a talk pertaining to question' (A. III. 107). The word 'Abhidhamma' occurs in the *Citta* Sutta and *Mahāgosiṅga* Sutta (M. I. 214.), where the Theras are said to have 'a talk pertaining to the doctrine (abhidhammakatham̄).' Therefore, the earlier usage of Abhidhamma doesn't convey any suggestion to transcendentalism. It was not used as the higher philosophy just as Abhidhamma teaching that have been collected and grouped into Abhidhamma Pitaka.

### ***Definition of Abhidhamma according to Commentaries (Attakathā)***

The commentarial texts define 'Abhidhamma' in different way. In the commentaries, Ven. Buddhaghosa Thero describes Abhidhamma as the Higher Teaching preached by the Buddha. The Pāli word Abhidhamma is composed of the prefix 'Abhi' and multi-significant term 'dhamma'. According to the traditional explanation, 'abhi' mean great, exceeding (atireka) or subtle, noble, ultimate, ultra (visittha). While the 'dhamma' is the Buddha's teaching.

Commentaries have described Abhidhamma as a special and advanced form of teaching. It is said that 'Abhidhamma is Higher Teaching (Abhivisittho dhammāti Abhidhammo). Therefore, Pāli commentaries define Abhidhamma as supplementary doctrines (atireka), special/superior doctrines (visesa/visittha) or supreme doctrines (uttama).

These meanings are based on the interpretation of the prefix 'abhi' which means 'supreme' or excellent,' and of dhamma as 'doctrine' or 'teaching.' The other interpretation of Abhi, which seems to be historically earlier, is 'pertaining to', or 'facing/envisaging.' Therefore, Abhidhamma means 'pertaining to doctrine' or 'concerning to doctrine.'

In the *Samantapāsādikā*, the commentary of Vinaya Pitaka, it is said thus:

Yam ettha vuḍḍhimanto, salakkhaṇā pūjītā paricchinnā;

Vuttādhikā ca dhammā, abhidhammo tena akkhāto"

Because this shows things that suffer growth

Of proper attributes, to be revered

Well-differentiated, and of worth

Surpassing, Abhidhamma is its name (Smp. I. 20).

### ***Definition of Abhidhamma according to Scholars' Ideas***

There are various descriptions on Abhidhamma given by scholars. N. K. G. Mendis says that Abhidhamma means 'Higher Teaching' because it treats subjects exclusively in an ultimate sense (paramatthasacca) (Mendis, N. K. G. 2006). E. J. Thomas and G. P. Malalasekera define it as 'Special Dhamma' referring to mode of teaching found in the Abhidhamma Pitaka which is so different from the method employed in the Suttas. F. L. Woodward defines Abhidhamma as 'extra doctrine', 'further Dhamma' (Malalasekera, G. P. 2003). Prof. Galmangoda Sumanapala has interesting idea. He says thus:

There arose problem for the defining and explanation after a large number of dharmaśūtras were composed. If the common form of language were used there could get the result in different views and interpretations regarding the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, the leading disciples made use of highly technical form of language to define and explain the doctrines. In the third Buddhist council, there had been a substantial among the Theravāda regarding the definitions and explanations supplied to the doctrinal such as dharmaśūtras. Therefore, after the third Buddhist council by adding the prefix: "abhi" to the term "dharma" it was introduced as "abhidhamma" which is known as the seven books of Abhidhamma (Galmangoda, Sumanapala. 1998: 25).

The term 'Abhidhamma' have been defined in various ways in other Buddhist schools. Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra gives numerous explanatory definitions of the term Abhidhamma as follow:

1. Chinese tradition: great dharma, peerless dharma, excellent dharma, and the study about dharma or facing dharma.
2. The Abhidharmikas and the Ven. Vasmitra: abhidharma is able to investigate and discriminate the characteristics of phenomena thoroughly. Vasumitra further says that it is expounded from the Sūtra.
3. Bhadant: it is called abhidharma because it collects, arranges and discriminates such problems as defilement, purity etc. by means of sentences, phrases and words.
4. Pārvata: it is called abhidharma because it is ultimate, excellent, and infallible wisdom.
5. Dharmaguptakas: it is called abhidharma because of the predominance of dharma.
6. Dārstāntikas: Nirvāna is supreme amongst all things and abhidharma is next to it. Therefore, it is called abhidharma.
7. Buddhadeva: "abhi" means predominance and this abhidharma is called abhidharma because it is predominant.
8. Vimalabuddhi: "abhi" means veneration and this abhidharma is called abhidharma because it is venerable and honorable.
9. Vasubandhu: abhidharma means 'facing the dharma' and dharma designates nirvāna and the four truths as the law of the ideal.

According to the above definitions, each and every definition of the term Abhidharma or Abhidhamma clearly indicates that it is an elaboration or a developed form of a collection of the fundamental teachings (Galmangoda, Sumanapala. 1998: 27-28). However, Abhidhamma does not merely restate or recapitulate the teaching of the sutras, but it takes a more analytical and systematic approach, reorganizing the content and explicating the implicit meanings through the commentary (Jayadhammo, Weerasak. 2024: 241).

## The Depth of Abhidhamma According to Atthakathā

In the commentarial works, the Pāli commentator Ven. Buddhaghosa Thero had made multiple effort to demonstrate the superior of Abhidhamma. When defining the word Abhidhamma, he showed the deep and superior of Abhidhamma by explaining the prefix 'Abhi.' He said that the prefix 'Abhi' is like 'Ati' which is used in the sense of preponderance and distinction. Just as 'aticchatta (the pre-eminent sunshade)', 'atidhaja (pre-eminent flag)', 'atirājakumāra (prince par excellence)', 'atibrahma (the supreme Brahma)', so too dhamma is called Abhidhamma because it excels and is distinguished by several qualities from the other Dhamma (evameva ayampi dhammo dhammātirekadharmavisesatthena 'abhidhammo'ti vuccati) (DhsA. 2).

The commentator showed Abhidhamma as deeper than Suttanta. Philosophical teachings such as, "pañcakkhandhā dvādasāyatanāni, atthārasa dhātuyo, cattāri saccāni, bāvīsatindriyāni, dvādasapadiko paccayākāro" are not fully classified but only partially classified in the Suttanta. While in the Abhidhamma, those teachings are classified fully by the method of Suttanta-classification (suttantabhājanīya), Abhidhamma-classification (abhidhammadbhājanīya) and catechism (pañhapucchakam) (DhsA. 3).

Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thera explained how tradition acknowledged the specific nature of each piṭaka. It is said that the vinaya is the discourses on injunctions (āñā-desanā); the sutta is the popular discourse (vohāra-desanā), while the Abhidhamma is the discourse on ultimate truths (paramattha-desanā) (DhsA. 21). In the Atthasālini, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thera has attempted to distinguish between the nature of dhamma and abhidhamma. Dhamma or sutta is said to be discursive style "sappariyāya desanā" which uses similes, metaphors and anecdotes. While abhidhamma is non-discursive style "nippariyāya desanā" which uses impersonal, terminology meaning and functions (DhsA. 153).

In the Atthasālini, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thera suggested a way for comprehending the depth of Abhidhamma. He said that, in order to understand the depth of Abhidhamma, it must be understood that there are four oceans, such as: the ocean of repeated-birth (samsārasāgaro), the ocean of waters (jalasāgaro), the ocean of method (nayasāgaro) and the ocean of knowledge (ñānasāgaro) (DhsA. 10).

The repeated-birth (samsārā) is unbroken process of aggregates, elements and senses (Kandhānañca paṭipāti, dhātuāyatanāna ca; Abbocchinnam vattamānā, samsāroti pavuccatī). The ocean of repeated-birth is of an unknown beginning (samsārasāgaro anamataggova). The ocean of waters is incalculable and immeasurable. Therefore, it is only reckoned as the mass of water. The ocean of method is Tipitaka, the words of the Buddha. Comparing to the ocean of waves, the method of Abhidhamma is more extraordinary. The ocean is limited, below by earth, above by the sky, on side by the mountain encircling the word-system, and the other by the seashore. But the limits of the universal Paṭṭhana are not apparent. The ocean of knowledge is Omniscience. It is not possible to distinguish the different oceans of repeated-birth, of waters, and of method except by omniscience.

## Controversy Over The Historicity of Abhidhamma

Traditionally, it is believed that Abhidhamma was preached by the Buddha himself to his mother and other deities in the Tavatīṣṭha heaven. However, many scholars are not

satisfied with the traditional report saying that Abhidhamma was preached by the Buddha himself. Bringing some arguments, scholars question the authenticity of the Abhidhamma as the words of the Buddha. They come with these arguments:

1. Before his passing away, the Buddha told to Ven. Ananda that Dhamma and Vinaya should be the teacher after his passing (D. II. 155). Abhidhamma is not mentioned.
2. At the first Buddhist Council, Abhidhamma is not mentioned to be recited. It is recorded that Dhamma was recited by Ven. Ananda, and Vinaya was recited by Ven. Upali. Even, in the second Buddhist council also (Vin. II. 286).
3. The story of preaching Abhidhamma in the heaven is not mentioned in any sutta. Even, the story of the Buddha ascending to heaven to teach Abhidhamma is not mentioned in the Abhidhamma Pitaka itself, but in the later commentaries.
4. Abhidhamma is not mentioned as one of nine branches of teachings (navaṅga-buddha-sāsana). There are only mentioned *suttam*, *geyyam*, *veyyākaraṇam* *gātham* *udānam* *itivuttakam* *jātakam* *abbhutadhammam* *vedallam* (A. III. 86).
5. Kathāvatthupakkarana was composed by Ven. Mogaliputtatissa Thera at the end of the third Buddhist council and added it into Abhidhamma Pitaka (Medhacitto, Tri Saputra. 2023: 5).

Due to those reasons, there are arguments among scholars that Abhidhamma is not Buddhavacana, but as later teachings of prominent disciples of the Buddha in order to explain the Buddha's teaching into detail in different manners. Sautrāntika, a Buddhist sect arose in the period of Second Buddhist Council to Third Buddhist Council, strongly rejects the Abhidhamma as the Buddha's word. The tendency among the Buddha's followers to reject the Abhidhamma as the Buddha's words increased period to period.

This situation caused the Theravādin monks tried to preserve the Abhidhamma as the Buddha's words. In the commentaries, the commentator takes an opportunity to promote Abhidhamma as the higher teachings, and superior than other Dhamma. He said, only Ābhidhammika bhikkhus who are the true Dhamma Preacher (Dhammakathikā), the rest, though the preached Dhamma, they are not true Dhamma Preacher (Ābhidhammikabhikkhūyeva kira dhammakathikā nāma, avasesā dhammakatham kathentāpi na dhammakathikā) (DhsA. 29). The reason is in speaking they confuse the different kinds of Kamma and of its results, the distinction between mind and matter, and the different kinds of states. While the Ābhidhammikā do not thus get confused; for the bhikkhu who knows Abhidhamma, whether he preaches the Dhamma or not, will be able to answer questioned whenever asked. He alone, therefore, is a true Dhamma Preacher (Kasmā? Te hi dhammakatham kathentā kammantaram vipākantaram rūpārūpaparicchedam dhammantaram āloletvā kathenti. Ābhidhammikā pana dhammantaram na ālorenti. Tasmā ābhidhammiko bhikkhu dhammam kathetu vā mā vā, pucchitakāle pana pañham kathessatīti. Ayameva ekantadhammakathiko nāma hoti) (DhsA. 29).

The commentator promoted Abhidhamma as the Buddha's word. He further said that one who rejects Abhidhamma,

1. He gives a blow to the Wheel of Conqueror (Abhidhammam paṭibāhento imasmim jinacakke pahāram deti)
2. He denies the omniscience (sabbaññutaññāṇam paṭibāhati)
3. He subverts the Teacher's knowledge full of confidence (satthu vesārajjaññāṇam paṭinivatteti)
4. He deceives the audience (sotukāmam parisaṁ visamvādeti)
5. He obstructs the path of the Ariyas (ariyamagge āvaraṇam bandhati)
6. He manifests himself as advocating one of the eighteen causes of dissension in the Order (atṭhārasasu bhedakaravatthūsu ekasmin sandissati)
7. He is capable of doing acts for which the doer is liable to be excommunicated, or admonished, or scorned by the Order, and should be dismissed after the particular act of excommunication, admonition, or scorn, and reduced on scraps of food (ukkhepanīyakammatajanīyakammāraho hoti) ((DhsA. 29).

### Historicity of Abhidhamma According to Commentary

According to the commentary, after the Enlightenment, the Buddha spent the fourth week in the Ratanaghara, revolving in his mind the intricate doctrine of the Abhidhamma in all their detail (DhsA. 13). As mentioned in the Atthasālinī, Abhidhamma was preached by the Buddha himself to his mother who was born as deity and other deities in the Tavatīṣṭha heaven. After that, the summary of teachings was transmitted to Ven. Sariputta (DhsA. 14-17).

In the commentary, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thero gave an introduction of Abhidhamma by questions and answers.

1. From which source has the Abhidhamma originated? Faith which urges to enlightenment was the source. (**Kena pabhāvitoti** bodhiabhinīhārasaddhāya pabhāvito).
2. Where has it matured? In the five hundred and fifty Jātakas (**Kattha paripācitoti** addhachakkesu jātakasatesu).
3. Where, when and by whom was it mastered? At the foot of the Bodhi tree, on the full moon day of Visākhā, by omniscient Buddha (**Kattha adhigatoti** bodhimūle. **Kadā adhigatoti** visākhāpuṇṇamāsiyam. **Kenādhigatoti** sabbaññubuddhena).
4. Where, when and by whom was it studied? At the foot of Bodhi tree, during the seven days spent at Jewel House, by the omniscient Buddha (**Kattha vicitoti** bodhimānde. **Kadā vicitoti** ratanaghara-sattāhe. **Kena vicitoti** sabbaññubuddhena).
5. Where, for whose benefit, and for what purpose was it taught? Among the Tāvatiṣṭha devas, of devas, and for release from the Four Floods. (**Kattha desitoti** devesu tāvatiṣsesu. **Kassatthāya desitoti** devatānam. **Kimattham desitoti** caturoghaniddharaṇattham).
6. By whom was it accepted? By devas (**Kehi paṭiggahitoti** devehi).

7. Who are learning it? Probationers and good worldlings (**Ke sikkhantīti** sekkhā ca puthujjanakalyāṇā ca).
8. Who have learned it? Saints free from Intoxicants. (**Ke sikkhitasikkhāti** arahanto khīṇāsavā).
9. Who know it by heart? Those who lay it to heart. (**Ke dhārentīti** yesam vattati te dhārenti).
10. Whose word is it? Of the Blessed One, the Arahant, the Supreme Buddha. (**Kassa vacananti** bhagavato vacanam, arahato sammāsambuddhassa.)
11. By whom has it been handed down? By the unbroken line of teachers. (**Kenābhatoti** ācariyaparamparāya) (DhsA. 31-32).

There is an argument whether Abhidhamma is the Buddha's words or not, since Kathāvatthu was composed by Ven. Moggaliputtatissa Thero in the time of the third Buddhist council, in order to refute heretical views held by some heretic monks. Modern scholars agree that Kathāvatthu is one of evidences to prove that Abhidhamma is later development. However, the commentator rejected that argument. Ven. Buddhaghosa in the Atthasālinī discussed that Ven. Mogaliputtatissa Thera expounded Kathāvatthupakkaraṇa not by his own knowledge, but according to table of contents laid down, as well as by the method given, by the Buddha (**Moggaliputtatissattheropi** idam pakaraṇam desento na attano nāñena desesi, satthārā pana dinnanayena thapitamātikāya desesi). Therefore, according to tradition all the entire books of Abhidhamma Piṭaka should be acknowledged as the word of the Buddha (DhsA. 6). With this statement found in the commentary, traditionally Theravada orthodoxy assigns that Abhidhamma was the authentic teachings taught by the Buddha himself. Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thera also asserted that "What is known as Abhidhamma is not the province nor the sphere of a disciple; it is the province, the sphere of the Buddha" (Bodhi, Bhikkhu. 2007: 9).

## Theravāda Abhidhamma Literature

In Theravāda tradition, there are four stages of Buddhist literatures, namely: Canon (Tipiṭaka), Commentary (Atṭhakathā), Sub-Commentary (Tīkā), and Compendium (Pakaraṇa). Abhidhamma literatures can be classified into four stages as follows:

### 1. Pāli Tipiṭaka: Pāli Canon

In Theravāda tradition, canonical Abhidhamma is represented by seven books, namely: Dhammasaṅgaṇī (The Classification of Dhamma), Vibhaṅga (The Analysis), Dhatukathā (The Discourses on Elements), Puggalapaññatti (The Designation of Individual), Kathāvatthu (The Book of Debate), Yamaka (The Book of Pairs) and Paṭṭhāna (The Book of Conditional Relation).

### 2. Pāli Atṭhakathā: Pāli Commentaries

The second stage of Theravada Abhidhamma is represented by commentaries (atthakatha). Those commentaries were composed by Ven. Buddhaghosa in fifth century AD based on the original Sinhalese Commentaries as interpretations of Mahāvihāra fraternity. Those commentaries are: Atṭhasālinī (commentary on the

Dhammasaṅgani), Samohavinodanī (commentary on the Vibhaṅga) and Pañcappakaraṇaṭhakathā (commentary on the remaining five books; Dhatukathā, Puggalapaññatti, Kathāvatthu, Yamaka, and Paṭṭhāna).

### 3. Pāli Tīkā: Pāli Sub-Commentaries

The third stage is represented by Tīkā. It means sub-commentary. It was written by Ven. Ananda. There is huge sub-commentary named Abhidhamma Mūlaṭīkā.

### 4. Pāli Pakaraṇas: Pāli Compendium

The last stage is represented by Saṅgaha or Pakaraṇa. They are compendiums compiled in later Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods in Sri Lanka. A Sangaha or compendium means a summary. It was commented by Ven. Dhammapala. There are all together nine compendiums, such as: Abhidhammāvatāra (an introduction to Abhidhamma), Saccasaṅkhepa (an explanation of truth), Abhidhammattasaṅgaha (compendium on the Abhidhamma), Mohavicchedani (destruction of ignorance), Nāmarūpapariccheda (an analysis of mind and matter), Nāmarūpasamāsa (a summary account of mind and matter), Rūpārūpavibhanga (analysis of mind and matter), Paramathhavinicchaya (an inquiring to ultimate truth) and Nāmacāradīpani (on the behavior of mind).

## CONCLUSION

Traditionally, Abhidhamma is defined as higher teaching preached by the Buddha in Tavatiṁsa heaven to his mother and other deities. It is highlighted in the commentaries that Abhidhamma should be acknowledged as Buddhavacana. However, the historical authenticity of Abhidhamma as the words of the Buddha has been challenged by modern scholars since they have identified some incompatibilities looking at the historical background of the development of Buddhist literature. It reveals controversies among Buddhist scholars, since Kathāvatthupakkaraṇa, one of the seven books of Abhidhamma Piṭaka, was compiled by Ven. Mogaliputtatissa Thera in the end of the third Buddhist council long after the parinibbāna of the Buddha. Scholars regarded Abhidhamma as the later development of the Buddha's teaching intended to provide a more detailed and systematic explanation of the Buddha's teaching.

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