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An Introduction to Sufism

What is Sufism?

Sufism is a movement within Islam that is identified with the practice of Islamic spirituality. The origins of this tradition are often traced to the time of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad, when a certain section of his associates began to lay emphasis upon spiritual discipline. They were known as *ahl-e-suffah* (the people of the bench).[1] Members of this group were indifferent to the worldly life and engaged in constant meditation. After the demise of the holy Prophet, many of these renunciants became dissatisfied with the lifestyle and activities of the caliphs, and some rose in revolt against the regime. Sufism is said to have emerged out of this reaction against the worldliness of the early caliphs.

Sufism is known as the *batin* (inner) aspect of Islam. A process of systematic training and practice enables the carnal soul to be purified in a series of stages, with the heart of the devotee becoming enlightened in the stage of illumination. Sufism involves the development of a person's innate spiritual and intuitive abilities towards the attainment of mystical felicity. Thus, the practice of Sufism leads to an expansion of consciousness—an increase in the devotee's self-awareness and consciousness of the well-being of the universe s/he inhabits. Self-transformation through right conduct allows the Sufi to interact with others so as to construct a better and more peaceful world. In this way, the Sufi finds peace and contentment and experiences growing awareness of a higher plan. Ultimately, the Sufi path brings the seeker in closer proximity to the Supreme Reality, which is God.[1]

The Sufis say that humanity is asleep. They believe that the majority of people go through life oblivious of the realities of life and death, existence and God, living as though in a dream. The opposite of sleep, however, is wakefulness. The Sufis teach that we are all equipped with subtle centres of consciousness that generally remain unused; but, through practical guidance and sincere effort, such consciousness can be gradually awakened. Once activated, our inner faculties of perception allow us to witness realities that appeared to us previously as obscure mysteries. In this way, we can move from the dark into the light. Sufism may thus be understood as a path of gradual awakening whereby we turn away from all that is illusory, and subsist in Reality. This is the sense in which Muhammad's remark, that 'My eyes sleep but my heart does not sleep,' has been interpreted in Sufism.[2]

Sufism is the spiritual aspect of Islam. Those who follow the Sufi path strive to follow both the inner and the outer aspects of Islam with gradually increasing sincerity. Another name for Sufism is thus simply *ihsan*, or 'sincerity'. Sufism is less a sect of Islam than a mystical way of approaching the Islamic faith. It

[1] Sufi teachings (online available) http://www.schoolofsufiteaching.org/qal/sufism/whatis.html

has been defined as 'mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and ultimate knowledge through direct personal experience of God'.[3]

Origins of the term 'Sufism'

Islamic mysticism has been known by the term 'Sufism' in Western languages since the early 19th century. It is possible that the word 'Sufi' derives from *suf*,[4] literally 'wool' in Arabic, referring to the early Islamic ascetics who lived during and shortly after the time of Prophet Muhammad. These ascetics often wore coarse woollen robes. Similarly, Islamic mysticism is known as *tasawwuf* (which literally means 'to dress in wool'). Sufis are also referred to as *fuqara*, 'the poor', the plural form of the Arabic term *faqir*. The Persian equivalent is *darvish*. The Persian term *pir* ('old in knowledge') is also sometimes used in place of 'Sufi'.[5]

We have already mentioned the *ahl-e-suffah*[6] (literally, 'the people of the bench'), a group of early Muslims who lived in the first mosque at Medina in close proximity to the Prophet Muhammad. They wore woollen robes and sought to attain spiritual felicity. Yet another possible derivation of 'Sufi' is from the Arabic word *safa*,[7] or 'purity'. Although the lexical meaning of the term 'Sufi' derives from *suf* (wool), its inner import may be said to be *safa* (purity). Sufi refers to the purity of *jism* (body), *qalb* (mind) and *nafs* (soul). Thus, in a nutshell, we may say that a Sufi is he who wears a woollen robe and whose heart is pure with the knowledge of Reality. It is obvious from the Hadith that Prophet Muhammad was used to wearing a woollen robe: *alaikum bi labs al suf tajiduna halawat al iman fi qulubekum* (the Prophet himself said that the wearing of *suf* increases the sweetness of faith). In another Hadith, the same idea is repeated: 'Prophet Hazrat Muhammad also wore woollen robes and rode the ass' (*kanan nabi yalbasu suf wa yarkabul himar*).[8]

Sufism and Islam

The term 'Sufi' is not found in the Holy Quran and Hadith. The Arabic word *tasawwuf*, however, was prevalent in Arabian society during the time of Prophet Muhammad. Although it is not clear that the Prophet himself ever used the term *tasawwuf*, there is evidence that he used words like *ihsan* (spiritual sincerity), *faqr* (humility), *salehin* (piousness), *sadeqin* (truthfulness), *saberin* (patience), and so on. These words are also found in the Quran.[9] According to Sufi teachers, Sufism is essentially the pursuit of such sincerity, piousness, truthfulness and patience; in other words, perfectly following the way of Muhammad, inner as well as outer. Thus, *tasawwuf* or Sufism is inseparable from the teachings of the Prophet. One who acts contrary to the principles of Islam cannot be considered a Sufi. Some commentators hold that Sufism was an 'innovation', created after the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

However, others maintain that although the word *tasawwuf* was not in common use during the Prophet's time, neither were words like *fiqh* (jurisprudence) or *kalam* (philosophy). Yet all of these concepts existed during Muhammad's time, even if the specific terms were coined later.

History of Sufism

The early history of Sufism has been traced to the period of the Umayyad Dynasty (661–749), less than a century after the founding of Islam. As mentioned previously, Sufism emerged out of an ascetic movement within early Islam. Like the Christian monastics, the Sufis were disturbed by the worldliness that accompanied the rapid expansion of the Muslim community. They meditated on the doomsday passages in the Quran, which earned them epithets such as 'eternal weepers'. These early Sufis adhered strictly to Islamic scripture and tradition. The idea of *tawakkul*, absolute trust in God, informed their efforts and became a central tenet of Sufism during this period.

In the 9th century, however, the Sufis began to lay a new emphasis on the notion of 'love'. The asceticism of the early Sufis began gradually to give way to a form of mysticism. Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah (d. 801), a woman mystic from Basra, is credited with having been the first to articulate the Sufi ideal of a pure, disinterested love of God, a love that had no place for the hope of paradise or the fear of hell. Thereafter, Sufi discourse evolved to encompass ideas of strict self-control, psychological insight, interior knowledge, annihilation of the self, mystical insights about the nature of man and the Prophet, and hymns and poetry. This period, c. 800–1100, is often regarded as the phase of classical Sufism.

The next important development in Sufism was the establishment of the brotherhoods (*silsila*s), chains of initiation in which disciples were inducted into Sufi mystical practice by a leader-founder. By the 13th century, Sufism is considered to have reached its 'golden age'. This was the period during which some of the greatest mystical poetry associated with the Sufi tradition was composed. Prominent mystics from this period include Ibn al'Arabi (Spain), Ibn al-Farid (Egypt), Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi (Persia), and Najmuddin Kubra (Central Asia). Sufism had now spread throughout the Islamic world and played a significant part in shaping Islamic society.[10]

Sufi Beliefs

Sufism emerges out of orthodox Islam, and its doctrines have a firm foundation in the text of the Quran. While some Sufi mystics may have been influenced by monist or pantheistic beliefs, these ideas were not accepted within the mainstream of Sufi discourse. Sufism's core tenets include *tawakkul* (i.e., abandoning oneself to complete trust in God) and *tawhid* (the idea that 'there is no god but God'). Sufi mystics interpreted *tawhid* as the belief that nothing exists but God, or that nature and God are essentially two

aspects of the same reality. Another core principle in Sufi mysticism relates to love: God's love for man, and the love of man for God. Such love has formed the basis of much Islamic mystical poetry, and is also spoken of in many hymns of the Quran.[11]

Sufi Practices

Sufis distinguish four stages on the path to the attainment of knowledge of God: Sharia (the exoteric path represented by the canon of laws), *tariqa* (the spiritual path of Sufi seekers), *ma'rifa* (divine knowledge/wisdom) and *haqiqa* (the interior reality, or the Truth). The seeker must practise various forms of rigorous self-discipline as he passes through each of these stages. Sufi practices have their foundation in purity of life, strict obedience to Islamic law, and imitation of the Prophet. Through self-denial, careful introspection and mental struggle, Sufis seek to free the self from all selfishness, thus attaining *ikhlas* (sincerity), absolute purity of intention and action. 'Little sleep, little talk, little food'—these are the core principles of the Sufi seeker's way of life. Fasting is considered one of the most important preparations for the spiritual life. Mystical experience of the divine is also central to Sufism. Unlike other Muslims, Sufis are characterized by their fervent seeking of *dhawq*, a 'tasting' that leads to illumination beyond the standard forms of learning.[12] However, the insight gained from such experience is not considered valid if it contradicts the Quran.

The Path

The Sufi way of life is called a *tariqa*, 'path'.[13] The path begins with repentance and submission to a guide (*shaykh* or *pir*). If accepted by the guide, the seeker becomes a disciple (*murid*) and is given instructions for asceticism and meditation. This usually includes sexual abstinence, fasting and poverty. The ultimate goal of the Sufi path is to fight the true Holy War (*jihad*) against the lower self (*nafs*), which is often represented as a black dog. According to the Sufis, in Islam there are two types of *jihad*, namely, *jihad al-asghar* (smaller warfare) and *jihad al-akbar* (greater warfare). To take someone's life in the holy war is *jihad al-asghar*, while the war against the evil propensities of the carnal soul is *jihad al-akbar*, which is a very difficult struggle.

On his way to illumination, the mystic undergoes changing spiritual states (*hal*), such as *qabd* (constraint) and *bast* (happy spiritual expansion), fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raza*), longing and intimacy (*uns*), which are granted by God. He also experiences changes in the intensity of these states according to the spiritual 'station' (*maqam*) in which he abides at any moment. The culmination of the path is *ma'rifa* (interior knowledge, gnosis) or *mahabbah* (love), which implies a union (*fana*) of lover and beloved (man and God). The final goal is annihilation and persistence in God (*fana'wa baqa*),[14] involving the annihilation

primarily of one's own qualities but sometimes of one's entire personality. This is often accompanied by spiritual ecstasy or 'intoxication'. After the annihilation of the self and the accompanying ecstatic experience, the mystic enters a 'second sobriety' in which he re-enters the world and continues the 'journey of God'.

Rituals: Prayers, music and 'whirling'

Apart from daily prayers as well as following the five pillars of Islam, the central method in Sufi practice is a ritual prayer or *dhikr* (remembrance), derived from the Quranic injunction to remember God often in the Surah Baqara.[15] It consists in the repetition of either one or all of the most beautiful names of God, of the name 'Allah', or of a certain religious formula, such as the profession of faith: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.' A rosary of 99 or 33 beads has been in use since as early as the 8th century for counting the thousands of repetitions.

In the mid-9th century, some mystics in Baghdad introduced sessions with music and poetry recitals (*sama*)[16] to facilitate the achievement of the ecstatic experience. There have been many debates since then about the permissibility of this practice. Some *be-shara* (without law) Sufis have occasionally introduced narcotics as part of this method as well, but this is considered a perversion of Sufi practice and has invited the condemnation of *ba-shara* (with law) Sufis. The popular 'whirling dervishes' are members of the Mevlevi order of Turkish Sufis, which is based on the teachings of the famous mystic Maulana Jalauddin Rumi (d. 1273). The practice of spinning is the group's distinctive form of *sama*. The whirlers, called *semazen*s, practise a form of meditation in which they seek to abandon the self and contemplate God, sometimes achieving an ecstatic state. The Mevlevi sect was banned in Turkey by Ataturk in 1925, but performances for tourists are still common throughout the country. The clothing worn for the ritual and the positions of the body during the spinning are highly symbolic: for instance, the tall camel-hair hat represents the tomb of the ego, the white cloak represents the ego's shroud, and the uplifted right hand indicates readiness to receive grace from God.

Sufi psychology

Sufis believe that the human being is a combination of body (*jism*), mind (*qalb*) and soul (*nafs*). The psychological traits and states of mind of the Sufi anchorite have a pivotal role during his spiritual practices. To control the mind's power, a Sufi devotee engages with sincerity in certain subtleties (*lata'if*), known in Sufi terminology as *lata'if-e-khamsa* (the five subtleties), a psycho-physical enterprise by means of which the aspirant's development of mind and mental peace can be measured. This psycho-physical enterprise bears an inextricable relationship with the spirituality that ultimately elevates the

seeker and allows him to experience the inner vision of knowledge (*didah-i-batin-i-ma'rifat*). These *lata'if* include the *qalb* (heart), *ruh* (spirit), *sirr* (secret), *khafi* (hidden) and *akhfa* (most hidden) states. All these *lata'if* function in their specific ways to regulate the mind and body of the spiritual devotee. Each *latifa* is attributed a particular colour, like yellow for *qalb*, red for *ruh*, white for *sirr*, black for *khafi* and green for *akhfa*. Each *latifa* bears a relation with the soul (*nafs*) that possesses a specific spiritual gradation. After systematic spiritual training, an anchorite can achieve the vision of the pure essence (*mushahada*), where each *latifa* is associated with a particular irradiation (*tajalli*) that ultimately elevates him in perfect psycho-physical tranquillity. It is also called the state of pure unity (*ahadiyat-e mujarrad*) and perfect peace of mind (*itminan*). Thus, man, according to Sufi spirituality, is a microcosm (*alam as-sahgir*) composed of 10 constituent parts whose origins lie in the macrocosm (*alam-i-kabir*), which designates both the world of creation (*alam-e-khalq*) and the world of order (*alam-e-amr*). A Sufi devotee is deeply connected with these psychological states that turn him into the perfect human being (*al insane al kamil*).[17]

Sufi orders

After the death of the Prophet in AD 632, his closest associates passed on his teachings to the seekers of the next generation, who in turn became the *shaykh*s (perfected guides) of the generation after them. This process established chains of initiation and spiritual genealogies through which every authentic Sufi guide could lay claim to a series of teachers leading directly back to the Prophet. Such a chain of teachers is known in Sufism as a *silsila* or a *shajara*.

There exist numerous Sufi *silsila*s; however, some are known worldwide for their eclectic approach. So, for example, followers of the great Shaykh Bahauddin Naqshband and his successors down to the present day are said to follow the Naqshbandi *tariqa*. Similarly, Abdul Qadir Jilani gave his name to the Qadiriya *tariqa*, Moinuddin Chishti to the Chishtiya *tariqa*, Shaykh Sihabuddin Suhrawardi to the Suhrawardiya *tariqa*, Abul Hasan Shadhili to the Shadhiliya *tariqa*, and Ahmed Faruqi Sirhindi Mujadded to the Mujaddediya *tariqa*. In English, each of these *tariqa*s is referred to as a 'Sufi order'.[18] Ultimately, however, all of these orders are traced directly back to the Prophet Muhammad, and their differences are primarily geographical or superficial in terms of methods/practices.

Sufism and cultural interaction in India

The Sufis of Persia had close contact with Indian culture and civilization. Towards the end of the 12th century AD, the first Sufi *silsila* was established in India by the celebrated Sufi Khwajah Muin al din Chishti (1143–1234). He came to India from Sistan during the reign of Prithviraj Chauhan, a powerful

king of Ajmer and Delhi.[19] Khwajah visited various parts of India and finally settled down at Ajmer, where he founded his own hospice (*khanqah*). There is ample historical evidence that many Sufi anchorites had come to India before Khwajah, but none became as popular as Khwajah Muin al din Chishti.

Before finally settling in Ajmer, Khwajah Muin al din spent much time in meditation at the *dargah* (shrine) of Data Gunj Baksh Lahori al Hujwiri. Thereafter, he founded the Chishtiya *silsila*. His eclectic approach earned him the appellations 'Sultan ul Hind' (the spiritual sovereign in India), and 'Naib e Rasulullah fil Hind' (the representative of the Prophet in India).[20] The Khwajah's efforts led to greater engagement of Hindus and Muslims in India with each other's religions and saints. The Muslim rulers evinced a keen eagerness to study the Upanishads, the Gita, Vedanta, and Yoga, while some Hindus were deeply impressed by Islam's spirit of equality and brotherhood, the simplicity of its rituals, and its insistence on monotheism. It was around this time that the common worship of Satya Pir became established in India.[21]

The cross-fertilization of Islam and Hinduism gave rise to the Bhakti and Sufi movements in India. The Bhakti cult stressed the fundamental equality of all religions and the unity of God. It preached simple devotion to the Reality, protesting against the excessive ritualism of existing religious practice. Sufis had also reacted against the rigid formalism and ritualism of Islam; they preached *wahdat al-wujud* (a kind of pantheism) and peace for all (*sulhe kul*). Though Sufism came to India from Persia, it was later highly influenced by Buddhism, Vedanta and Yoga.[22] Hazrat Nizam al din Auliya attracted devotees from all faiths. Dara Shukoh, the Mughal prince who was an eclectic Sufi, compiled the chief philosophical tenets of Islam and Hinduism, and translated the Vedanta and *Yoga Vasishtha* from Sanskrit to Persian. His book, *Majma ul Bahrain* (Mingling of Two Oceans), is a unique contribution to the discourse of syncretism in language, literature and culture that has made such a great impact on Indian society and culture. Dara Shukoh believed that the two religions, Hinduism and Islam, were identical, and that their differences were only verbal.[23]

Contact between Sufis and *yogi*s also became more frequent and meaningful. The perfect *yogi* was associated by Sufi Shaikh Nasirud-din Chirag-i Dehlavi with the *siddha*s. The topics discussed at the *jama'at-khana* gatherings of Baba Farid were of great interest to visiting *siddha*s, whose beliefs were founded on Hatha Yoga. Al-Biruni, unquestionably a profound authority on comparative religions, noted Sufi parallels to the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, which he himself translated into Arabic.[24]

The impact of Sufism was not only confined to the social realm, it also touched the musical culture of India. In orthodox Islam, music is not permissible, but Sufism permits it. According to the Sufis, *sama*

(music) offers a swift flight to spiritual ecstasy. From the 13th century onwards, Sufi mystical songs were recited as *sama* in gatherings, where many of the most talented musicians were newly converted Muslims. Shaikh Ahmad from Naharwala in Gujarat, who gave expert renditions of Hindawi *raga*s, lived during this century. The Shaikh undoubtedly attended the most significant *sama* performances; he was present when a Persian verse produced such powerful ecstasy in Shaikh Qutbud-din Bakhtiyar Kaki that he died a few days later[2]. The recitation of *sama* became popular at all Sufi centres in the form of Hindawi music. Saiyid Gisu Daraz admitted that each language was endowed with certain characteristics of its own; to him, none was as effective as Hindawi for its ability to express esoteric ideas. Hindawi *sama* music, the Saiyid believed, was also subtle and elegant, penetrating deeply into the heart and arousing the humility and gentleness of people.

The literary impact of Sufism was profound. Generally the language of the Sufis bore deep inner meaning rather than being literary, and was difficult to apprehend for common people. The Sufis also wrote many commentaries on Sufi mystical works. The famous composer of romantic epics, the poet Ilyas bin Yusuf Nizami of Ganja, died in Azerbayjan on 4 Ramazan 605/12 March 1209; yet his *ghazal*s and *masnawi*s soon reached India and aroused the interest of those who had a knowledge of Persian. Shaikh Hamidud-din Nagauri made a free Hindi translation of one of Nizami's *ghazal*s and included in the text both the Persian original and the equivalent Hindawi *doha*s.[26]

Guru Nanak was acquainted with Islamic mysticism. He had met personally with Shaikh Sharaf of Panipath and Shaikh Ibrahim, the spiritual successor of Baba Farid al din Ganj-i-Shakar. Baba Farid wrote extensively on Sufi mysticism, and his many verses were systematically included in the Guru Granth compiled by the fifth Sikh guru, Guru Arjun, in 1604. In the 17th century, Prannath, a *yogi* from Gujarat, initiated a movement against the rigid formalism of religion, and wrote many treatises influenced by Sufism like *Khulasa*, *Khilwat*, and *Chhota Qayamat Nama*.[27]

Similarly, Dadu Panthis (followers of Dadu, a 16th-century saint) were also highly influenced by Sufism. Dadu, a celebrated mystic of medieval India, was a disciple of Kamal, whose close contact with Indian Sufis had a great impact on the Hindi, Marwari and Persian languages and literatures.[28]

Sufism also entered into dialogue with various doctrinal strands in India. The *Siddha Siddhanta Paddhati* by Gorakhnath (c. early 11th century) and some works by his followers formed the basis of the doctrines of the puritanical Naths. These texts offered a common ground for the exchange of ideas with Sufis like

[2] http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/21133/11/11_chapter%205.pdf

Shaikh Hamidud-din Nagauri and Baba Farid. Discussion of the concept of Ultimate Reality enhanced the mutual respect of the Naths and the Sufis. According to Gorakhnath, Ultimate Reality could not be conceived by logical reasoning; it was a supersensuous, super-intellectual, direct experience achieved in the state of *samadhi* (trance), or a perfectly illuminated state of consciousness like the Sufis state of *ma'rifa*.

To Gorakhnath and the *siddha*s, the phenomenal cosmic system was not false or illusory like in Sufism, nor did it have merely subjective Reality. The pure will (*icchha-matra*) inherent in the perfect transcendental nature of the Supreme Spirit was the source of the entire spatio-temporal order and of many different kinds of empirical realities. The *Siddha Siddhanta Paddhati* demonstrated the relationship between *advaita* (non-dualism) and *dvaita* (dualism) by using the analogy of water and bubbles similar to that used by Sufis in the *wahdat al-wujud* system.[29] Bubbles appear on the surface of the water, then both bubbles and water appear merged with each other, the former losing their ephemeral identity. The changing multiplicity of bubbles does not allow their separation from the water.

Besides Sufi poetry, another very significant literary impact relates to the Hatha Yoga treatise, the *Amrita-Kunda*.[30] It is believed that it was translated by Qazi Ruknud-din Samarqandi who was probably Qazi Ruknud-din Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Amidi of Samarqand, the author of the *Kitab al-Irshad* who visited Lakhnauti between 1209–10 and 1216–17, and was initiated into Hatha Yogic principles by a *siddha* called Bhojar Brahman. The work was later translated into Persian.

The knowledge of some Indian Sufis such as Shaikh Abdul-Quddus and his Rudauli *pir*s was not limited to understanding and practising *pranayama* or *pas-i anfas*, or to delineating semantic similarities and dissimilarities. The Shaikh's *Rushd Nama*,[31] which consists of his own verses and those of some of his *pir*s, identifies Sufi beliefs based on the *wahdat al-wujud* with the philosophy and practices of Goraknath.

Systematic practice of *sultan-i zikr* (remembrance of God) elevates the Sufi devotee to the state of *fana' al-fana* (annihilation of annihilation). A description of this spiritual experience given by Shaikh Ruknud-din would tend to indicate that the *sultan-i zikr* was comparable to the Nath *siddha*'s concept of *nad*, and that *fana' al-fana* was a state similar to the experience of the *jivan-mukta*.[32]

The reciprocal impact was also found in social habits and customs. For instance, Shaikh Nurud-din (a Kashmiri mystic of the 14th–15th centuries) and his disciples preferred to call themselves *rishi*s, not Sufis. Of his many disciples, Bamud-din, Zainud-din and Latifud-din were Brahmins by birth but became Muslims under the influence of their *pir*'s intense spiritualism. The stories of their conversions are like many others concerned with mystic conversion, but all consistently portray Shaikh Nurud-

din as a spiritual beacon to Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus alike. Shaikh Zainud-din invented a distinctive dress for *rishi*s which consisted of a variegated woollen cloak with a black-and-white pattern running through it.

The *rishi*s strongly impressed both Abul-Fazl and Emperor Jahangir. *Rishi*s believed that members of their order had turned Kashmir into a heaven for the people, although they themselves led harsh and austere lives. The contemplative life of the *rishi*s was founded on the practice of *pas-i anfas* or *pranayama*. Generally, these ascetics remained celibate, believing that a family was a great impediment to the pursuit of a saintly life. Shaikh Nurud-din admitted that although meat eating was permitted by the Sharia, to him it represented cruelty to animals, a stance that attracted many non-Muslims to his fold.[33]

From this discussion, it emerges that the impact of Sufism in India was multidimensional, and that Sufi beliefs and practices had a strong and powerful influence upon existing culture and civilization.

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