

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi

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According to the MOS, all phenomena can be grouped into three categories, the three natures:

1. Thoroughly established nature
2. Other-powered nature
3. Imputational nature

Sometimes people get stuck at and cannot go beyond the level of words. They are confounded by terms such as other-powered nature. You don't have to be confused or confounded by these words. You just have to know exactly what they mean.

Other-powered nature

According to this school, other-powered nature is another way of saying impermanent phenomena, compounded phenomena, and composed phenomena. Therefore, other-powered phenomena, impermanent phenomena, and composed phenomena are synonymous.

What is the main characteristic of such phenomena? Other-powered natures, impermanent phenomena, and composed phenomena basically refer to phenomena that undergo momentary change, i.e., phenomena that change from moment to moment. This change is due to the cause that brought about that particular phenomenon. Impermanent or composed phenomena are under the power of the causes that brought them about. Hence they are called other-powered.

All impermanent phenomena are like that. They undergo momentary change. But why is it their nature to undergo momentary change? Because they are under the control of the power of their own respective causes that brought about their existence. This is the meaning of "other-powered." The word "other-powered" is a way of helping us understand what exactly impermanent or composed phenomena are.

Thoroughly established nature

In the context of the MOS, thoroughly established nature is the same as ultimate truth. Thoroughly established nature means emptiness. According to this school, what kinds of emptinesses are there?

- There is the emptiness of a self-sufficient substantially existent person.
- There is the emptiness of the subject and object as different entities.

- There is the emptiness of phenomena as natural bases of engagement or referent of names.

These emptinesses are all thoroughly established natures.

In short, what is thoroughly established nature? It is emptiness. Emptiness of what? (1) The emptiness of the self of persons and (2) the emptiness of the self of phenomena.

In the context of the MOS, emptiness is an ultimate truth. In this school, thoroughly established nature, ultimate truth, and emptiness are synonymous.

Imputational nature

Imputational natures are of two types:

1. existent
2. non-existent

- Imputational natures that are existents refer to all permanent phenomena other than emptiness; for example, uncompounded space.
- Imputational natures that are non-existents are, for example, external objects. According to this school, external objects do not exist. An external object is an imputation through the force of conceptuality. Another example is the sky-flower. That does not exist but nevertheless it is imputed by conceptuality.

These are the things that you have to remember. According to the MOS, all phenomena are included in these three natures:

- Thoroughly established natures and other-powered natures are truly established.
- Imputational natures are not truly established.

According to this school, what is an ultimate truth? It is emptiness. If emptiness is ultimate truth, every other phenomenon that exists would be a conventional truth. This means out of the three natures:

- Thoroughly established nature is an ultimate truth
- Other-powered nature and imputational nature are conventional truths.

THE THREE NATURES		
Other-powered phenomena , composed phenomena, and impermanent phenomena are synonymous. The main characteristic is that they undergo momentary change. This change is due to the cause that brought about that particular phenomenon.	Thoroughly established nature , ultimate truth, and emptiness are synonymous. There are the emptiness of the self of persons and the emptiness of the self of phenomena.	Imputational natures are of two types: 1. existent (e.g. uncompounded space) 2. non-existent (e.g. external objects) It is an imputation through the force of conceptuality.
truly established	truly established	<i>not</i> truly established

Studying the tenets

We have to understand why we are learning these four tenets. That is very important. We should always link what we have learnt to the four seals that we talked about in the beginning of this module. The four seals attest to a particular doctrine being Buddhist and they stamp it to be a Buddhist path.

The four seals are:

1. All composed phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated phenomena are miserable (or in the nature of suffering).
3. All phenomena are empty and selfless.
4. Nirvana is peace.

In particular, let us look at the second seal: All contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering.

What we are all looking for is an end to our problems and misery. The question arises, “Can our misery be stopped?” The Buddhist answer is, “All our misery and problems can be stopped because all phenomena are selfless.” This means that whether we can put an end to our suffering or not depends on whether we understand selflessness or not.

Each of the four tenets has its own presentation, but the essence of what they are trying to express is their respective ideas as to what constitutes selflessness, what exactly selflessness is. When you realise that, it can put an end to all your misery and problems.

What we don't want are suffering and problems. The question is, “Can we put an end to them or not?” The answer given in the teachings is this, “If we realise selflessness, then we can put an end to all our problems and suffering.”

That leads to the next question, “How does the realisation of selflessness reduce and destroy our afflictions?” That is a question we have to think about for ourselves.

What does each of the tenets say about selflessness that supposedly is the antidote that will put an end to our misery? This is something we have to learn and to discover for ourselves through our own experience, our practice, our meditation, and so forth. We have to look at our own experiences and see how it works.

You should notice by now that when we were looking at the Hinayana tenets, i.e., the GES and the SS, when they talked about selflessness, they only talked about the selflessness of persons. They do not talk about the selflessness of phenomena.

But once we start to look at the Mahayana tenets, beginning with the MOS, on top of talking about the selflessness of persons, they also talk about the selflessness of phenomena.

What I am saying to you now is not just a delivery of a lecture. Rather as I talk, you have to think about what I am saying. It is something for you to reflect and meditate on.

In our mind we have different afflictions. We get upset, we have anger, and we also have desire and attachment. Take, for example, attachment. When attachment arises, we have to ask ourselves, by looking within, how does it arise? It is very clear that whenever we get emotionally involved with or attracted to an object or person, that emotional involvement always entails the appearance of a very attractive object or attractive person.

Similarly, when we are upset with some situations or at someone, that emotional

involvement is always based on the appearance of something that is very unpleasant or bad, something you do not like.

But it is not just the appearance of an attractive object or person that leads to you being attached and it is not just an appearance of a very unpleasant situations, object, or person that upsets you. It is based on a sense of the “I.” The person looks attractive to *me*. *I* find the person attractive. Then you get emotionally involved. The “I” is always involved. Similarly, because the person appears unpleasant or ugly to *me*, is not nice to *me*, you get upset, don’t you?

We don’t become attracted to an object or person because that object or person appears pleasant to *somebody else*. It has to appear pleasant and attractive to the “I”. Then we get emotionally involved.

Similarly, someone looking very unpleasant or bad to *somebody else*, that is not the reason for us to be upset at that person. That person, object, or situation has to appear unpleasant to *me*, then the “I” gets upset.

In dependence on the object or person appearing either pleasant or unpleasant to *me*, then the “I” gets attached or becomes angry. All the afflictions like anger or attachment always arise in dependence on this sense of “I.” Whether we get attached to or upset by some situation, object, or person, those emotions always arise from within the sense of this “I.”

This means that the stronger the sense of the “I”, the more we think that this “I” is everything, that it is most important or most precious. Commensurate with that way of looking at the “I,” then you would have stronger attachment or stronger anger.

This is quite apparent. When you look at how your mind works, it is very clear. We are very attached to our friends, people on *my* side or part of *my* group. The stronger we look at our friends in this way, the stronger the attachment. Similarly, with regard to situations or people that we dislike, “This person is *not* on my side and is *not* part of my group. This person is *my* enemy,” then again the anger will be stronger.

If we were to just relax, let go, and loosen our grip on this sense of the “I” or me, if we were to allow ourselves a bit more space in the mind from our own experience, definitely we will see a corresponding decrease in our anger, attachment, and so forth. This is clear from our experience. We can tell that this is so.

Friends do exist. Enemies do exist. *My* friends exist. *My* enemies exist. Of course they exist. But while they exist, when we loosen that grip on the “I,” the ego and give our mind more freedom and space, then the attachment that usually arises in dependence on seeing or holding on to some people as *my* friends, and the anger that usually arises in dependence on holding others as *my* enemies, will decrease. Even though they remain as friends and enemies, when we loosen the grip on the “I,” the afflictions generated in relation to them would decrease and not be as strong.

Just having some idea of selflessness can really help to lessen the afflictions such as anger and attachment.

Imagine that you walk into a jewellery shop. You may be very excited when you

look at some diamond jewellery. There is an appearance of something very nice and based on that, it is possible for a thought to arise, “How nice if I can have that.” Diamond jewellery is just an example. Then you act upon that thought and buy the diamond. Once you have bought the diamond, it becomes yours and the “I” comes into the picture. Now it is not just a diamond. It becomes *my* diamond. You can see the difference in the level of emotional involvement with the object, before buying the diamond and just after buying the diamond.

After the “I” comes into the picture, the attachment is so much stronger. Not only does the object look better and more precious than before, the attachment becomes stronger than before because the “I” has come into the picture and the diamond has now become *my* diamond. The object has not changed. It is still a diamond, but what has changed is that you have now become its owner. When the “I” comes into the picture, the sense of clinging is much stronger than before. What has changed? Our emotional involvement and the “I” coming into the picture.

Then when you lose your diamond, you will also lose sleep over it because now it is *your* diamond. When it is not your diamond, when it was sitting in the shop, you do not care what happens to it. Even if it was stolen, you would not be bothered or lose sleep over it because it is not your diamond. However, when it is in your possession and the “I” has come into the picture, when you lose it, you get upset and worried.

Hinayana tenets & the selflessness of persons

In cases when there is a very strong sense of an “I,” what we are grasping at is a real permanent “I.” We say that it is a permanent, unitary, and independent “I.” That is what we are grasping at. Also we grasp at a self that is able to stand on its own, a self-instituting and a self-sufficient “I.”

In the Hinayana tenets, the GES and the SS, we talked about the emptiness of the permanent, unitary, and independent self and the emptiness of a self-sufficient substantially existent person. We talked about how they operate. In these Hinayana tenets, these two kinds of self of persons do not exist.

We first have to understand how there isn’t a permanent, unitary, and independent self. On top of that, we can see for ourselves that although it appears, the self-sufficient substantially existent person also does not exist. We can understand that from our own experience. We have seen that kind of grasping. Even with a little bit of understanding of the selflessness of persons, definitely you can see a reduction in the clinging on to the “I.” This leads to a reduction in the afflictions, be it anger or attachment. Definitely we can see a reduction.

We have been talking so much about meditating on selflessness and emptiness. But what exactly is that? It is for us to realise and to discover for ourselves that the “I” that appears to exist in a particular way does *not* exist whatsoever. We have to discover for ourselves, from our own experience, that when we believe that there is a real “I,” that there is such a self-sufficient substantially existent person, it will lead to an increase in our afflictions.

We have to see why, in reality, a self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist. By using logic and reasoning, when we can see for ourselves that such a person does not exist, then definitely we can see for ourselves a reduction in

the afflictions that comes along with it. The whole point of meditating on the selflessness of persons is to reduce and weaken the apprehension of a self of persons. When we reduce and weaken the apprehension of a self of persons, we also reduce and weaken the afflictions. When we reduce and weaken the afflictions, definitely we will have fewer problems and less suffering.

We can discover this for ourselves by reflecting and meditating on the selflessness of persons. Then we will discover for ourselves that with the reduction in our self-grasping, we will also see a reduction in our afflictions such as attachment and anger. When we have less grasping and clinging on to *me, me, me*, then there will be less clinging to *my* friends, *my* group, *my* enjoyments, and so forth. When we have less attachment to these things, definitely there will be less anger as we often get upset because of our attachment to these things.

When you look at the first two Buddhist tenets, the GES and the SS, their presentations on the selflessness of persons is like the first stage of the practice. It is through meditating on and realising the selflessness of persons that we can see a reduction in our afflictions. We have to realise for ourselves how a permanent, unitary, and independent self does not exist and how a self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist. By seeing this for ourselves, using reasons, we will be able to reduce our grasping at such a self of persons. When we reduce our self-grasping and clinging on to this mistaken identification of the self, we will see a reduction in our afflictions.

Mahayana tenets & the selflessness of phenomena

Then when you come to the Mahayana tenets, starting from the MOS, there is a presentation of the selflessness of phenomena. Why is this so? You can train, in the initial stage, by meditating on the selflessness of persons that is presented in the Hinayana tenets. Through that, you definitely will see a reduction in the afflictions, such as anger and attachment.

Nevertheless, pleasant and unpleasant phenomena still appear to us. There are still appearances of nice things, unpleasant things, good people, and bad people. Based on these appearances, again we get emotionally involved. We still get upset and we still get attached because we react to these appearances of pleasant and unpleasant phenomena. This is when the understanding of the selflessness of phenomena comes into play.

Earlier on, in the Hinayana Tenets, there is only the presentation of the selflessness of persons that dealt with the involvement of the “I.” It did not deal with the objects to which the “I” is attached or by which the “I” is upset.

Here, in the presentation of the selflessness of phenomena, there is the understanding that phenomena appear as if they were self-instituted, have a self, and there is some kind of identity from the side of the phenomena. Although they appear in this way, in reality, that is not how they exist. When you combine this understanding with the earlier understanding of the selflessness of persons, then you have, in your hands, something much more powerful to work with against the afflictions.

Now you have the two selflessnesses coming into play. On the one hand, you have an understanding of the selflessness of persons. As described earlier, the self of persons does not exist in the way it appears. On top of that, you combine this understanding of the selflessness of persons with an understanding that

phenomena also do not exist in the way they appear to you, i.e., they do not exist in the way that you believe them to exist.

So now you have an understanding of the selflessness of persons, i.e., related to yourself and the selflessness of phenomena that you are either attached to or upset at. Do you not think that such an understanding is much more powerful than just having an understanding that the self (of persons) does not exist in the way it appears?

When we started looking at the Mahayana tenets, we started with the MOS. On top of the selflessness of persons, they talk about the selflessness of phenomena. What exactly then is the selflessness of phenomena? What are you meditating on here? Basically you have to discover for yourself that phenomena do not exist in the way they appear. That is the whole point.

The MOS: Non-existence of external objects

At the end of the day, what you are trying to find out now is how phenomena do not exist in the way they appear. According to the MOS, this is where the non-existence of external objects comes into play. To meditate on the selflessness of phenomena means to discover that phenomena do not exist in the way they appear to us. According to the MOS, they say that although there is the appearance of external objects, in reality, external objects do not exist.

When something pleasant appears to us, we get attached to it. We get attached because we think that there is something real out there, outside of the mind. There is an appearance of something out there and we believe in that appearance. Therefore we get attached. Here, according to the MOS, although external objects appear, that is *not* how things exist.

The MOS explains that all objects, forms, and sounds that you experience do not exist as separate from your mind, outside of your mind. Rather, they exist as just appearances or projections of your mind. Specifically they are the projections of the ripening of karmic seeds or imprints in your mind. Due to the awakening of these karmic seeds and imprints, you have the appearance of these objects. That is what an object is. So it is *not* something external, something outside of your mind. Therefore there are no external objects.

Your experience of the appearance of a beautiful object is only due to the ripening of karmic imprints in your mind. There is nothing coming from the side of an object outside of your mind. According to the MOS, if we are able to understand that the appearance of this beautiful form is just a projection of *my* own mind—that it is just a ripening of a particular karmic imprint in *my* own mind and, other than that, there is nothing out there that is outside of my mind and, from its own side, a real external object—this kind of world view definitely will help us to reduce our grasping at and attachment to such an object.

Sometimes we may have very exciting dreams. We get emotionally involved in the dream and we get attached to or upset by it. When we wake up from the dream and realise that it is just a dream, then whatever fear or attachment we may have had during the dream disappears. Sometimes even after we wake up from the dream, in the initial period, there may still be some tense feeling, fear, excitement or attachment to the dream. But after a while, when you are a little bit more awake, because it was just a dream, that sense of emotional involvement will fade.

Based on the world view that there is something right there outside of the mind, that there is a real external object right there and that everything is coming from the side of the object, whether pleasant or unpleasant, then our emotional involvement will be very strong. Recall then the view of the MOS and follow it by thinking in this way: “Although there is this appearance of a real external object right there, I understand that this is just a projection of my own mind. It is made up by my mind. What I see is none other than the result of the ripening of a karmic imprint in my mind. It is coming from my own mental projection. There is no real external object separate from my mind.” When you can think in this way, then I think definitely you can see a reduction in your emotional involvement with the object, whether it be anger (or aversion) or attachment.

According to the MOS, when we come to realise that all conventional truths do not exist in the way they appear to us, that there are no external objects, over time, we will reduce our clinging, grasping, anger, and attachment.

From this, one can understand that by delineating the view of the selflessness of phenomena, by understanding what that is, you have a far more powerful tool in your hands to work with against the afflictions. Besides the view of the selflessness of persons, now you add the view of the selflessness of phenomena. Definitely what you have at your disposal is much more powerful than just having the view of the selflessness of persons.

The view of the Middle Way School

The MOS, the AMWS, and the CMWS talk about the selflessness of phenomena but they differ as to what that selflessness of phenomena is.

According to the Middle Way School (MWS), they say that the way phenomena appear to us is not a factual or accurate representation of reality. It is not true. According to the MWS, they explain that when a phenomenon appears to us, it appears as if that is the way the object actually exists, that that is its very nature. We are talking here about how, in general, the MWS explains about how things appear to us. We are not talking about reality. According to the MWS, when a thing appears to us, it appears as if that is the final or ultimate nature of that object, that there is nothing beyond that. That is what we call, in philosophical language, the final mode of abiding of the object.

According to the MWS, how do phenomena appear to us? They appear to us as if that is their final or ultimate nature, that that is what the objects really are. Things appear to us as if that is how they exist finally or ultimately. That is how things appear to us. They are real.

According to the MWS, if phenomena existed in the way they appear to us, that would mean that the objects would have to be ultimately established. That would mean that the objects have to be truly established. That is the meaning of true establishment or ultimate establishment.

Khen Rinpoche: Are you getting somewhere with this or not? You must squeeze your brain a bit.

It is not easy because we are looking at the great treatises here. Normally I say that receiving initiations is nothing. That is very easy. We just sit there but

whether you receive the initiation or not is a different question. You just think that you have received it.

Thinking about selflessness is much more challenging than receiving initiations and even far more challenging than conferring initiations. It is very easy to confer initiations. I mean anyone can give initiations but the difference lies in whether the person is qualified or not. Even then, it is a very easy matter of just going through the motions and performing the rituals.

It is much more challenging to present these teachings and it is also much more challenging to understand these teachings. But it is only through understanding these teachings that you will see a change in the mind. When you think about this, these are the things that will cause the mind to change. When you see the truth for yourself, you are then able to eliminate whatever superimpositions or wrong understandings that you may have. Then you experience the joy of such understanding. That is not something you can gain from an initiation.

When you sit through an initiation, you may think, “I generate great bliss” and that is about it. Of course when we do not have the realisation of great bliss, then we cannot talk about feeling great bliss. On the other hand, the joy that comes from learning and from seeing truths that we have discovered for ourselves, that is certain to bring about some real benefit.

I mentioned before my own experience. Because I do not understand everything, I do think about the teachings. When I gain some understanding of some points after I had thought about them, I feel joy, thinking, “How wonderful.” When I sit through initiations, I think there is some bliss but that is about it. It is difficult for me to experience the same kind of joy that I find from discovering the teachings for myself. I find it difficult to experience that same joy when I am attending initiations.

Our own discovery of the teachings of the Buddha comes about when we study, learn, and think about the teachings. When we start to see some truths in them, then that joy is very different. It is only then that you really have some faith in the teachings of the Buddha. It is amazing and it is heartfelt. That can only come about through discovering the Buddha’s teachings by thinking about them. I don’t think it is possible to have this kind of feeling and this sense of discovery by sitting through initiations. Simply by being present and receiving the initiation, I think it is difficult to generate the same kind of faith in the Buddha.

Of course, I am talking about us as ordinary individuals. Most of us are like that. The exception are those who really do have very high realisations. When they receive empowerments, it is a completely different experience. We like to think we are like them but we are not. We are ordinary individuals.

So for us, the way is to make the discovery for ourselves through learning the teachings of the Buddha and then seeing its authenticity and truth for ourselves. When we see that truth, the joy that one experiences is very different. At that time, you really start to have a real understanding of what is a buddha and generate real faith in the Buddha. For us, that is the only way. That is why Lama Tsongkhapa keeps on saying that we must learn, we must educate ourselves, and we must reflect about what we have learnt.

You have to think about the four seals. In particular, that what we do not want is suffering. All contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering. In order

to overcome suffering, we have to overcome its cause, i.e., our ego-grasping, clinging at the self, the self of persons, and so forth. That is what we need to get rid of.

Can we get rid of our suffering just by attending initiations? No, obviously not. Just by taking initiations, you can get rid of your suffering? No. We like to scramble here and there looking for empowerments but still nothing happens. Still there is suffering. This is because we have not targeted the root of the problem: our ego-grasping, clinging to a self, and our grasping at the self of persons. In order to overcome suffering, we have to overcome this grasping at the self of persons. The only way to do this is to realise selflessness. To realise selflessness, we have to meditate on selflessness. Before we can meditate on selflessness, we have to find out what selflessness is. You have to learn and study what selflessness is.

Do you see the process now? Only when you understand this, only then will you see how important it is to study tenets. You have to see the point for yourself. No matter how you think about it, from whatever angle, the conclusion is still the same: You have to learn. There must be education, learning, and then reflection.

If what you do not want is suffering, if what you want is freedom from suffering and liberation from samsara, then this is the one and only way. In particular, you have to learn about selflessness. Before you can even meditate on it, you have to learn what selflessness is. Only then can you cultivate your understanding during meditation. Through meditation, definitely you will be able to reduce the afflictions. In so doing, definitely you will be able to reduce your suffering and misery.

It is very important to gain an understanding of selflessness before you can meditate on it. But even gaining such an understanding is not an easy feat. It is very, very difficult.

In my case, I have to teach. I find it extremely difficult to teach this topic. Although I read different texts and different commentaries, it is still very difficult to be able to summarise and put them together in some coherent form, that the view is definitely this and not that. Sometimes I even wonder whether I am presenting the right thing or not. I find it very difficult because it is not straightforward and it is not easy. Even just delineating the view, to say what is and what is not, that is really very challenging. Forget about realisations for the time being. Even just being able to explain what exactly is and what is not, that in itself is very challenging and very difficult.

According to the MWS, just think about our own experience. How do things appear to us? We do not question those appearances. We just take them as they are, that that is how these objects are in reality. Basically we accept what appears to us. That is how the object exists. There is nothing beyond what appears to us. We take that to be the final object, the final reality, or in philosophical language, the final mode of abiding of the object.

According to the MWS, if this is how phenomena really exist in reality, that means that:

- the object exists in the way it appears
- the object is ultimately established

- the object is truly established

If you accept that, then you have a problem. Why? Because if phenomena existed in the way they appear, they would be ultimately established and truly established. If that is the case, that means that phenomena would have to exist in the perspective of an ultimate awareness.

What is this ultimate awareness? It is the awareness that posits an ultimate truth. Specifically it is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. If phenomena existed in the way that they appear, in short, they would have to exist in the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.

So, according to the MWS, when they think it through, they said that phenomena are *not* truly established, phenomena are *not* ultimately established. This is just the general position of the MWS. In the MWS, there are two divisions. The ultimate or the highest view is that of the CMWS. Their explanation is even subtler. According to the final view of the highest school, the CMWS asserts that everything is mere name and their existence is merely imputed by mind.

I hope what I have said today might be of benefit. It is natural that people may wonder why we are studying all this. You feel disconnected, right? Why must we learn about the selflessness of persons, the selflessness of phenomena, and so forth?

I hope what I said today might be helpful. But you have to think it through again. Go through that process from the beginning and try to relate what you are studying to your own mind. When we say we meditate, what are we meditating on? Meditation basically means going through our own mind. We have to do it by ourselves with our own power. Think along the lines of what I have talked about today, starting from the beginning, and checking it against your own experience.

In order for us to be attached or upset, does the “I” have to come into the picture or not? When the “I” comes into the picture, how does it lead to our emotional involvement, how does it lead to anger and attachment?

Then think about how phenomena other than the “I” appear to us? When they appear to us as pleasant or unpleasant, how do we get emotionally involved? When we are emotionally involved, do we get upset or do we get attached? If we are able to counteract that kind of grasping, will it lead to a reduction in our afflictions? These are some of the things that we have to think about for ourselves. When we say meditate, this is meditation. What else is there?

For now, if you can just think about what I said today, it is like an outline, something for you to think about and to meditate on your own. Do your own discovery.

So far, in terms of the selflessness of phenomena, we have only talked about the emptiness of subject and object as different entities. Basically there is no external object and everything is the projection of the mind. That is relatively straightforward and quite easy.

What about the other aspects of the MOS? For example, how phenomena do not exist as the natural bases of engagement or referent of names? Even just to say

that, even just to explain that, it is so difficult. So this is something I will do in the next lesson. I will try.

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