

BUDDHA SĀSANA

Newsletter of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre



Our transition year

John McIntyre, Editor

Welcome to the Autumn 2011 edition of the BMIMC newsletter—coming perhaps a little later than the usual Summer issue, which was postponed as we waited to see how our 'transition year' would unfold.

Unfolded it has, and the year has taken shape in a way we could not predict at the time of the Winter issue in August and Tara's imminent departure for a year in Nepal. Towards the end of the year, as we set in place arrangements for a low-key program of courses, just the right person came forward to offer her services as a manager in 2011.

In February Beth Steff and Ashley Gonzales came to manage and assist at the centre from mid-February to mid-October. Beth and Ashley have been co-workers at Vimutti Buddhist Monastery located south of Auckland, New Zealand-Aotearoa. Vimutti is a monastery in the Thai Forest tradition. Beth is well-known to many of us as she has maintained a close association with BMIMC in various roles every year since she first worked at BMIMC in 2005. She knows the Centre very well and is known to many yogis and supporters. She brings a range of skills and a deep commitment to dhamma life and service. Her qualities will very considerably ease the period of transition to new arrangements and provide continuity. We are also fortunate in having the assistance of her co-worker at Vimutti, Ashley who brings practical and technical skills that complement Beth's expertise.

Beth says that her commitment is motivated by the special meaning that BMIMC has for her, as the place that launched her dhamma journey (see her story, next pages), a place 'that continues to nourish, surprise and warm the heart'. Coming from Vimutti, she is keen to encourage community both through the retreat schedule and through other activities including working weekends and community events.

We welcome her and Ashley to the Centre.

IN THIS ISSUE

A Meditator's Life. The new manager, Beth Steff writes about her dhamma journey and the practice of developing the *paramis* in daily life.

Classic Dhamma Books. The editor looks back to Jack Kornfield's early publication *Living Buddhist Masters* and its insights into Theravadan practice.

Dhamma service weekend. Beautiful April weather blessed the gardening activities of enthusiastic supporters.

Around the Centre. We note the passing of Alfred Myatt and gather other news of the centre and its community.



A MEDITATOR'S LIFE

Beth Steff

Beth Steff (left, with Ashley, assistant manager) has contributed this moving account of her dhamma journey.

In my first year as a widow I tried to recreate the busy Sydney life that I had been accustomed to but my heart found no nourishment in it. Since 2005 I have chosen a contemplative life: staff support at BMIMC, meditation in Burma, living at Vimutti Monastery, staying at Bhavana Society in USA with Bhante Gunaratana, culminating in more than half a year of seclusion in 2010.

Recently I have seen parallels between my life as a fulltime carer and my life in Vimutti, a monastery in the Ajahn Chah Forest tradition. When the terminal diagnosis was given following Michael's emergency brain surgery I felt like I was losing everything that mattered, everything that had given my life purpose and meaning.

Late in the year of 2003 the phone rang at my office: 'Can you please come home, I'm feeling really sick, I need to visit the doctor and I can't get there alone.' Never before had my independent husband called on me in this way. On that train journey I dismissed as mere imagining, thoughts that he was going to die. A few days later when the brain surgeon gave us the grave diagnosis, amidst the shock, confusion and nausea I made a very firm determination to learn everything I could from what would unfold in the year he had left to live.

Determination is one of the ten *paramis*, 'perfections' or in Ajahn Jayasaro's description, 'maturing qualities of the mind'—qualities that we can attend to, work with and develop, moment-by-moment wherever we find ourselves in our day. They are qualities that

can become core attitudes, potent antidotes to our habitual behaviours where greed, aversion and delusion arise. Touchstones that can guide us, if we keep them front of mind, towards what is 'right' on the Noble Eightfold Path. It is now, in reflection, I can see I was working with these *paramis*, first, as a carer and then more consciously in monastery life.

As a full-time carer I lost interest in much of the outside world, choosing to focus exclusively on Michael, our family and home life. In this way the ground was laid for the more secluded simple days of monastery living. I had already taken a first step in *nekkhamma*, the *parami* of renunciation, turning away from engagement in the outer world.

Grief and overwhelming emotion were constant companions and every day, all day, most of what I lived with, I didn't want. It was a 'first' in my life, staying with so many conditions that were unpredictable, unpleasant and very painful. It was a kind of apprenticeship in the *parami* of *khanti*, patient endurance, what the Buddha called 'the supreme incinerator of defilements' (Ajahn Jayasaro in 'The Paramis as Practices of Liberation').

A carer's role requires one to give continually, to give when the heart hurts, to give when the body and mind are exhausted, to give when there feels like there is nothing left to give. I learned much about *dāna*—the *parami* of generosity—giving without expecting returns, the unselfish consideration of 'other'.

I knew about the intense effort encouraged on retreat. This kind of effort arose in response to knowing with certainty that our family time together would be limited, we didn't know exactly how much time we had, we knew we didn't have much. The effort that arises in response to such circumstances can be vast:



effort to encourage opportunities to gather together, preparing meals for whoever came, maintaining home and hearth.

This effort, just like the giving, comes from a deep reservoir, when the heart remembers that every moment of this day counts. There is a strong emphasis in the Buddha's teachings that the path is one of courageous effort. In association with making Right Effort I recognize the great value of working in awareness of the *paramis*, the sixth step of the Path: effort to eradicate unwholesome states that have arisen; effort to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states; effort to bring forth wholesome states; effort to maintain and develop the wholesome states that have arisen.

Clearly vast effort and *dāna* comes more easily when fueled by the natural deep concern and connection for a partner and family. At times a wellspring of *metta* flowed out spontaneously to people I hardly knew: people we crossed paths with in our plentiful contact with the medical world. Especially in the Mercy Hospice in New Zealand the doctors, nurses, cleaners and support staff seemed to me like angels embodied. Their gentle, devoted, respectful care for Michael and myself remains with me as one of the most profound gifts I have ever received. Loving friendliness arose naturally, along with deep gratitude for all those

caring so tenderly for patients in the final days of their lives.

As the strain on mental, emotional and physical levels was continual, sleep not always restful and demands constantly changing, the need to conserve energy was vital. A discovery I made was the relief and comfort I felt with the practice of truthfulness. I generally told the truth but in many of those interactions I had no time or energy to skirt around issues. I was direct and straightforward and I needed others to be the same.

I reflected on 'right speech' and saw how past reluctance to discuss difficult subjects meant holding on to much that was 'unspoken' and thus likely to engender worry, fear or resentment. Within initial decisions about cancer treatment, the 'no treatment' option seemed a viable choice. But we didn't really know enough. Though fearful of what I would hear I needed to know the truth. I called the brain surgeon 'I have so many big decisions to make, packing up and selling our home, returning to NZ, I need to know and I need it straight, if there was no treatment, how long does Michael have?' 'He'd be lucky to live 3 months.' The stark truth, the no-frills reality, was invaluable in the planning that had to take place. Sometimes the truth is not easy and I notice how I'd prefer to add to or subtract from its essence but a calmer mind emerges from what is simple and succinct.

The *paramis*, like the young trees I planted and cared for at Vimutti, can be developed when given consideration and support. They can be used to reframe situations where unskillful habitual tendencies tempt. Driving my daughter's car one afternoon I saw her brow crinkle, her eyes widen: 'What's up with you Mum?' I didn't quite understand. 'You're in a traffic jam but you're chatting and laughing?' In the past I would get irritated in congested traffic. This time I had no such reaction: 'It's a good opportunity for patience training',

Ajahn Chandako's repeated refrain at Vimutti.

Going against the grain, ignoring the resistances in the mind, saying 'no' to my favourite habits, is like shining a spotlight on the dusty self-judging crevices, the cranky mind chatter, the finger-pointing whining mind. But as Ajahn Jotipalo says 'you have to pick it up before you can let it go'. I have to be in touch with my specific defilement specialties before I can decide I've had enough of them.



Beth's kuti from heaven, Vimutti Monastery

Life at Vimutti enhanced my understanding of the *paramis*. Our local supporters, who came each day with boxes of food, became for me, powerful role models for *dāna*, giving with such faith, joy, kindness and gratitude. Their visits enriched my days: at times I experienced an immense 'field' of metta in the monastery, greater by far, than the 150 acres on which it stood. Whilst I realised effort is stressed in every factor of the Noble EightFold Path—'one makes an effort to abandon wrong view ... one makes an effort to abandon wrong intention' (*Mahacattarisaka Sutta*, 117). At Vimutti the 'how to' was clarified.

There was a time when I equated precepts with restriction. As a monastery dweller I realized they brought me freedom to devote effort to practice and reflection. Living for long periods on eight precepts there's time to notice the mind that 'thinks' it wants food at night, distracting entertainment, friends to talk with. But in the 'giving up' of these I found a strengthening of determination, an increase in

effort, patience when disheartened, an appreciation of renunciation, a more natural tendency toward *metta* and *dāna*, an interest in wise reflection, a love for truth, and a clearer understanding of the way that *sīla*, moral behaviour, serves to bring balance and equanimity into the mind and heart.

*I have nothing to report, my friends.
If you want to find meaning, stop
chasing after so many things.*

—Ryokan

The way I am as I move through my day, the habits I strengthen are with me when I get to the meditation cushion. The *paramis* encourage habits towards the wholesome: renouncing entertainment allows the mind to be more content with less stimuli, patiently enduring the less desired develops perseverance, giving more lessens self absorption. The *paramis* can serve as practices of liberation (Ajahn Jayasaro).

So frequent reflection on the ten *paramis*—determination, effort, patient endurance, renunciation, loving friendliness, generosity, wisdom, truthfulness, morality and equanimity—has been fruitful. I have found access to more lightness of being, more buoyant contentment, and an energetic drive that can be a potent force. And in the times when I'm off balance, feeling some version of 'upside-down and inside out', when things seem murky, aversive, vague or grumpy—especially then, the *paramis* can serve as an effective methodology for working with the entire spectrum arising in the mind. 'You don't develop equanimity when you're feeling equanimous' (Ajahn Viradhammo, www.tisarena.ca).

The tough times helped me to see clearly the patterns that kept my life mediocre, allowing me to glimpse the chinks that could effect transformation. Because I could see them I could choose a way out.

*Should you shield the canyons from
the windstorms, you would never
see the beauty of their carvings.*

—Elizabeth Kubler Ross

AROUND AND BEYOND THE CENTRE

Vale Alfred Myatt

Sadly we have to note the passing of Alfred Myatt, meditator and energetic supporter of the Buddhadhamma in the Australian Burmese community. He was 70 years of age.

Alfred passed away following a long illness in early April, at home with his family. Brenda, his partner of 48 years, said that Alfred faced his impending death with courage and a meditator's resolve to 'watch the dying mind'.

Alfred's support in establishing BMIMC is well known. At the time Sayadaw U Pannathami first came to BMIMC as our teacher, without a kappiya, Alfred went to great lengths to collect food *danā* from the Burmese community during the week and deliver it to Medlow Bath. He was an active force in fund-raising whenever the need arose.

Graham Wheeler writes: 'My memories of Alfie are of a likeable and energetic man who was a strong and generous supporter of BMIMC. He devoted much time and effort to the Sydney Burmese Buddhist Vihara including serving as a chair and trustee member of the Vihara for several years. His infectious enthusiasm will be greatly missed by everyone who knew him'.

Thanks, Donald

We would like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Donald Elniff for the important part he played in easing the transition to new arrangements from the end of last year.

Donald lives nearby in Medlow Bath and took on an administrative role, looking after the office, the phone and mail and was able to play a caretaker role and generally be a contact point for BMIMC. He also worked on the new compost bins (see story).



Alfred Myatt at the completion of a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in the 1980s



Three men and some brickwork at the new compost bins, Christmas 2010

New compost bins

The Centre has in place a range of environmental policies. Our compost system for kitchen waste is an important part of BMIMC's green operation.

For some years we have had compost bins constructed of hardwood. These have gradually broken down and their replacement was discussed at some length. Large green Aero or Geddy style bins were considered, but it was decided to construct new brickwork bins.

Gavin, Donald, Rod, Paul and Michael gave their time to this work around Christmas last year. Our thanks to the the team!

September weekend

The next dhamma service weekend is **17—18 September**. If you missed the April event, this is another chance to help in the glorious spring garden and the annual clean-up of the centre. Many hands make light work!

Visitors to help with the garden are welcome to come and put in a weekend whenever they are able to do so. Please contact the centre to make arrangements. The best times are those weeks when staff are not fully occupied with coming retreats or weekends.

Small caravan required

Do you have a small caravan that could be loaned to BMIMC for the month of May? BMIMC has need of one on a temporary basis for use as accommodation during the forthcoming retreat led by Sayadaw U Vivekananda. The caravan will be parked in the grounds. More details ph: 4788-1024.

Are you a bookkeeper?

BMIMC needs a person with **bookkeeping and Quickbooks experience** for regular support, who could visit monthly for approx 2-3 hours to do Bank Account reconciliations and Business Activity Statements when its required. More details ph: 4788-1024.



Gavin and Gabrielle Cusack have a new grandson, Arun, pictured here with Shane.. He is named after Liz Oski's son,

FROM THE MANAGER

in Autumn



As the stunning autumn hues blend with the morning sunlight I feel deep appreciation for this time at BMIMC. I am quietly in awe of the fact that these wonderful facilities here only exist due to the generosity of all who have gone before.

Dhamma service weekend

A clear highlight so far was the recent Dhamma Service weekend, when thirteen folk gave their time to mow, weed, mulch, build, sew, paint and clean: their ardent effort was inspiring. Being part of a team in service for the Dhamma over those two days was enriching for both Ashley and I.



Pictures of the April 9 -10 weekend. Were you there? Weeders led by Meredith (at right) and Gavin repairing the verandah

It's a similar feeling when both Robyn Howell and Selena Blair travel up to support us with retreat preparation of cleaning, cooking and shopping. Also when Darren or Johan come to mow the large expanse of lawns; and the cook and assistant cook arrive to take responsibility for all the retreat meals.

Thank you to all who've given us their time and energy—its through this group participation that the centre flourishes.

Caring for the garden has been a strong focus here and we're fortunate to have Meredith Brownhill's generous involvement



Meredith Brownhill

and guidance. With years of Blue Mountain gardening and qualifications in that field she's a great guide for Kiwi and Texan weeders! Several big beds are cleared and being mulched. There's still plenty to do. Later in the year, if you're a gardener who'd love to help out, all assistance is welcomed at the 17-18 September Dhamma Service weekend.

I'm fortunate to have Ashley Gonzales here on staff. Recently she and Gavin (see left) repaired the entry verandah leading to the reception area. Ashley and I spent time together last winter at Vimutti Monastery in NZ. She has a wide range of skills (including building work) and is a great companion.

Together we look forward to welcoming you here on retreat.

—Beth

CLASSIC DHAMMA BOOKS

Living Buddhist Masters

We continue our reviews of classic dhamma books—those that have been important influences in the lives and practice of those associated with BMIMC.

The editor, John McIntyre, gives his appreciation of an early work by Jack Kornfield.

Discovering Buddhism and having some experience of insight meditation in the tradition of Mahāsi Sayadaw can generate great curiosity about different meditation practices in the larger picture of Theravada.

One book that helped satisfy that kind of interest for me was Jack Kornfield's *Living Buddhist Masters*, first published in 1977. It is also known as *Living Dharma* in the Shambala edition (1996) and as *Modern Buddhist Masters* in the 1988 BPS edition. The book is the record of a young man's encounters with different meditation traditions in Thailand and Burma. Thirty years later, it is still a valuable source of information, though few of the masters are now living. Indeed, the author stressed it was the living traditions of practice he was really describing.

At the time of Kornfield's search, political turmoil had closed off some of south-east Asia to Westerners. Burma permitted only short visits and Thailand was therefore the doorway to Buddhism for many. It is not surprising that the Thai forest tradition is prominent together with Burmese teachers. There are twelve masters named, six Burmese ((Mahāsi Sayadaw included) and six Thai teachers (*Ajaans*).

The book first gives an overview of 'essential Buddhism' followed by accounts of twelve meditation masters, their biography, approach to meditation and an example of their teachings such as a discourse or questioning session. Kornfield writes simply and very skilfully

of what is distinctive in each approach.

The author brings a degree of humility to his rather ambitious task. He begins by playing down the value of dhamma books in general, to make the point that we can only really find dhamma through direct experience. He says, with some wit:

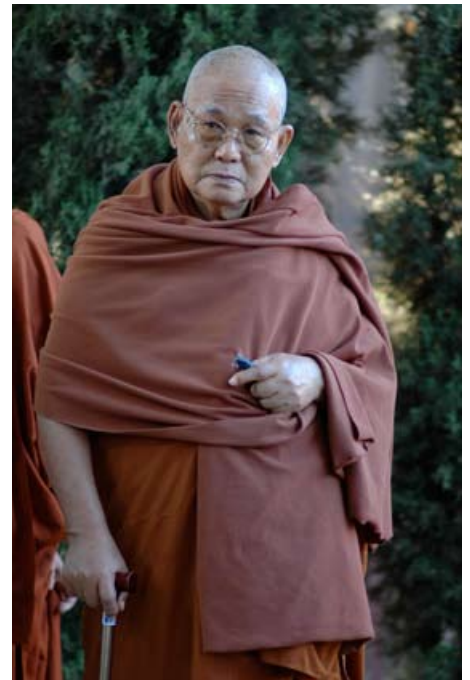
I like to think of books on meditation as spiritual garbage. However, eggshells and grapefruit rinds do indicate that somewhere nearby there has been nourishment.

There is plenty of nourishment in this book. It prompts reflection on the value of training in a tradition. The teachings are in most cases specific and often very exacting, and the Mahāsi practice is not alone in this regard. It is not the case that the book encourages a smorgasbord approach to practice—the message is quite the opposite.

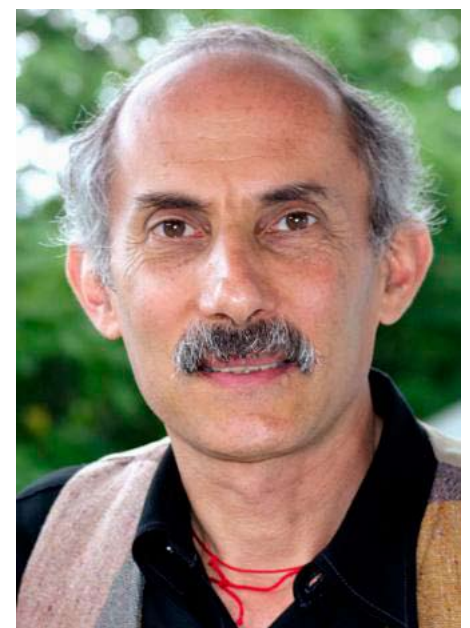
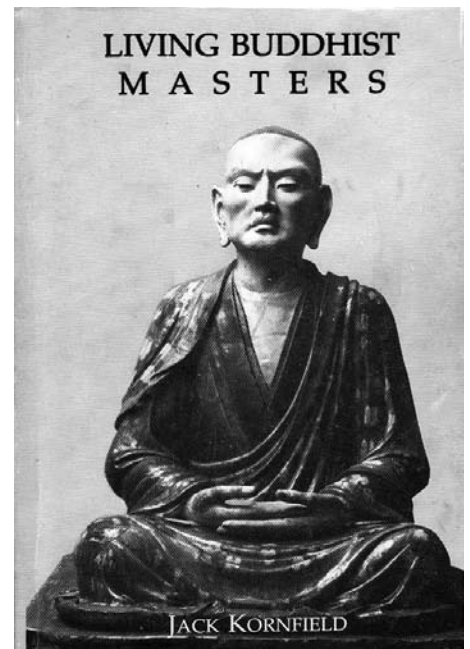
The book helps to put the Mahāsi tradition in the broader context of Theravada practice. For example, it is interesting to know more about the Burmese lay teacher U Ba Khin who inspired Goenka's approach to *vipassanā* meditation, and helpful in understanding it.

There are marked differences among the twelve teachers, for example, in the emphasis they give to developing concentration practice before going for insight; or the place of mindfulness in daily life and work; or the role of conceptual understanding in directing practice (where our tradition is emphatically experiential and treats prior theory as a potential obstacle to progress in insight).

Though it is perhaps less popular than Jack Kornfield's later books, *Living Buddhist Masters* is a classic—an essential and significant historical reference, of its time but still full of import for us.



Ovadacariya Sayadaw U Paṇḍitā Bhivamsa



Jack Kornfield in 2004

FUNDRAISING AND THE BUILDING PROGRAM

Last issue we noted that in late 2009 BMIMC received approval to build the new staff accommodation (see the complete plans in the last newsletter).

The new building will have two self-contained units and will offer better conditions for Dhamma service for our dedicated staff and create more flexibility in our accommodation.

Quotes from builders suggest that it will cost about \$100,000 - \$120,000 to get to lockup stage and up to \$180,000 to complete the building. There will be further costs from our commitment to green technology such as solar hot water (\$2500 after rebates) and a 1.5Kw photovoltaic solar power system, (about \$6000 after rebates).

The reserves in our building fund will go some way to funding work on the new accommodation to lock-up stage. This year's Vesak appeal presents an opportunity to add to this funding base.

The prospect of better staff accommodation is surely a worthy, practical and achievable goal. All donations to the Building Fund are tax-deductible.

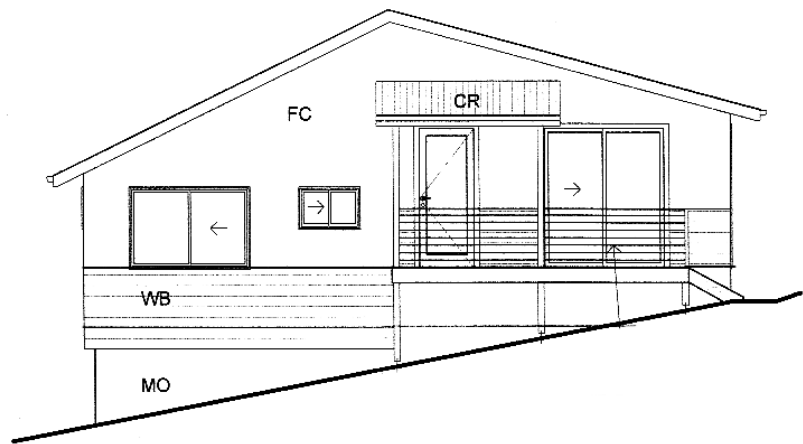
Your donation, using the form on the back page, is most welcome.

Joseph Smith bequest

Joseph Smith, a supporter of the Centre for many years, passed away quietly in his nursing home on 18 November 2010 at the age of 99 years. Joe was surely the oldest of our supporters and took a keen interest in Buddhism during the later years of his life. He was an avid reader of dhamma books and attended one or two retreats at BMIMC while in his 80's. He was a great raconteur and could always perceive the good in others. We gratefully acknowledge the \$2,000 bequest he left to the Centre in his will.



The site of the staff accommodation will be close to Rutland Road on the north-eastern corner of the property

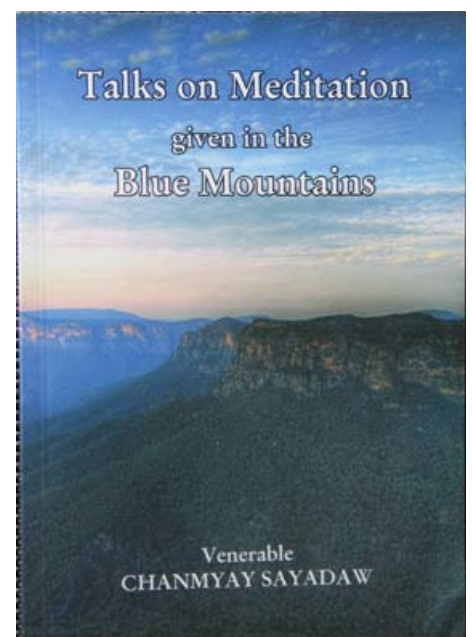


A Book of U Janaka Talks

At last the book of talks by Chanmyay Sayadaw Ashin Janaka Bhivamsa (Sayadaw U Janaka) has been published. The centre has a number of copies for free distribution.

Talks on Meditation given in the Blue Mountains comes from a month-long retreat conducted at BMIMC by Sayadaw in March 1998. Transcribed talks existed in draft form for some years before being checked by Sayadaw and corrected and edited by Venerable Ariya Ñāṇi. Nancy Dodge assisted the Venerable and took a leading role in seeing the book come to fruition.

The talks cover opening instructions, the nature of *vipassanā* prac-



tice, the importance of observing the mind, the five faculties, the four kinds of truth, dependent origination and the stages of insight.

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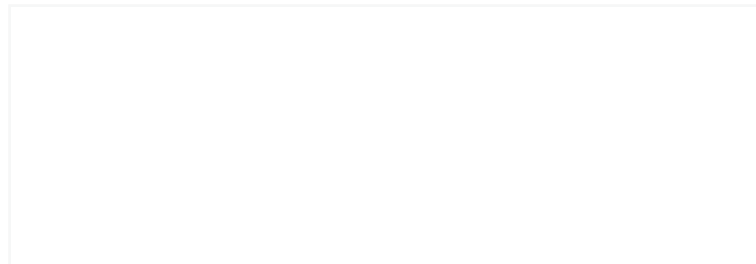
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