

## *Learning from Zen Arts: A Lesson in Intrinsic Valuation*

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In an age dominated by economism and underlying instrumentalism, the arts are often considered unimportant, or, at best, to have entertainment or recreational value. As the common expression goes, the arts are the frills. In this vein, whenever schools face budget cuts, arts programs are the first to go. A few years ago, in my own child's elementary school, this happened. Art was her most vital subject, one that enlivened her spirit and nourished her senses. She adored her art teacher and always came away from this class full of exuberance and enthusiasm. So the experience of losing her favorite teacher and subject was very upsetting to her. This was her bitter introduction to the values and ways of our world increasingly entrenched in economism and instrumentalism.

In this essay, I shall make the argument that, although the arts have been the victim of economism and instrumentalism, their power is such that, if only we could truly tap into it, they could become our healing medicine. But, for the arts to become such medicine, they have to be understood and undertaken in a better light than they conventionally have been in our culture. The conventional understanding equates arts with the domain of the beautiful. This view stems from Western intellectual and artistic traditions, wherein the beautiful and the good are

considered two not only distinct but separate qualities and values.<sup>1</sup> Thus, aesthetics has been the pursuit of the beautiful, while ethics is the pursuit of the good. But if we go to Zen or Taoist thought, we encounter a different tradition of intellectual discourse and life practices wherein aesthetics and ethics merge and become two aspects of the same radical (in the sense of the root) human experience<sup>2</sup>, technically called the 'nonduality' in Buddhist literature. As I shall show, in this radical experience of nonduality lies the key to the resistance against economism and instrumentalism. In nonduality, "the preservation of the world," to borrow Thoreau's phrase, lies. Thus, the arts are essential and critical to the planetary survival. Nothing can be further from truth and close to absurdity than the notion that the arts are a luxury item and have primarily recreational and ornamental values.



## Ethic of Instrumentalism

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<sup>1</sup> See Heesoon Bai, "Ethics and Aesthetics are One: The Case of Zen Aesthetics," *Canadian Review of Art Education* vol. 24, no. 2 (1997): 37 - 52. In the modern Western philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein stands out as an exception. Even so, Wittgenstein only alluded in an enigmatic way to this possibility of the integration of ethics and aesthetics. However, many postmodern thinkers are seriously engaged in exploring this possibility; for example, Richard Shusterman.

<sup>2</sup> Here, or elsewhere, I am not insinuating a general claim that the Zen/Taoism tradition has a "better" aesthetic theory than do Western traditions. No such claim is warrantable. 'Better' or 'worse' are evaluations which require criteria of evaluation; these, in turn, are most often tied to our purposes or goals. My purpose behind this presentation is to make the case that aesthetics can be a critical matter of planetary survival. It is in this light that I present a case of Zen aesthetics as a practical ethic.

Ethics typically refers to the branch of philosophy that deals with morality. However, it can also refer to our guiding moral principles, to our commitment to perceive and treat the world in such a way that we and the world mutually flourish.<sup>3</sup> When this mutual preservation and flourishing does not happen, we must hold our current ethic<sup>4</sup> as responsible and revise it.

Now, the hegemonic ethics we have been collectively enacting for the past two to three hundred years is instrumentalism: our increasingly seeing the world as an objectified, depersonalized Other existing solely for the purpose of the sovereign subject's consumption. Basically, the relationship between the subject and the object is marked by domination, subjugation, and expropriation. The subject is that which exercises its will and design upon the object which is merely the recipient. Put in value language terms, the subject has an intrinsic value, but the object has only an extrinsic, hence instrumental, value. The subject exists for itself, but the object exists only for the subject.

In the aforementioned schema of understanding, subjectness or objectness is then a matter of power relationship between beings. They are not absolute identities that beings and things inherently come with. Rather, these are contingent, relational identities that depend on how a particular being functions in its relationship to other beings. Thus, subjectness or objectness is a fluid, dynamic, qualitative notion. In other words, the beings of this world do not come already marked as subject or object but they come to assume degrees of subjectness or objectness, depending on the power dynamics they enter or have been entered into. To further explicate, something is an object in its relationship to something else to the degree that the former is subjected to the latter's power over it. Conversely, something is a subject in relationship to something else to the degree that the former exerts its power over the latter. In sum, the objectness of something has to do with how we relate

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<sup>3</sup> The ethical notion of human flourishing has, in the West, its roots in Aristotle's Ethics (see *Nicomachean Ethics*). In adopting this notion, I extend it to the mutual flourishing of all biotic communities. Today, when the viability of the planet itself is in question, ethics that are solely human-centered are irresponsible and damaging. Traditional ethical views have had a narrow agenda: some manner of survival and flourishing of the individuals. This narrow view is untenable given what we know about the principle of interconnectedness that operates through the entirety of the planet. It is not just the flourishing of individuals but of all biotic communities that our ethics have to address.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that the everyday ethics we live out are often not articulated but tacit. Tacit ethics reveal themselves to us through embodied patterns of conduct.

to it and what we do to it. Treat something as an object, that is, having no intrinsic value but only an instrumental value, then it will exist as an object for us.

Here is an illustration of the above point: in some historical-cultural contexts, trees have not been as objectivized as they are currently in our modern, industrialized society. In the latter, trees are most often commodities, meaning purely pure objects. Seeing trees this way disposes us to feel entitled to do whatever we want to them: chop them down, turn them into lumber, firewood and money. It is straightforward logic that this objectivist perception and treatment is destructive to trees. Moreover, if we see and treat the world's forest primarily in this way, and our population and technological power grow faster than the world's forests, then, again, it is only logical that, ultimately, much of the world will be laid in ruin. The estimate has it that 80% of the world's forest cover that existed two hundred years ago is now irrevocably gone. We can cite



thousands and thousands of such examples, including the destruction of human individuals and communities. The ethic of instrumentalism is an incomparably destructive force unleashed upon the world. If we are interested in the survival of the entire biosphere, curbing instrumentalism is the most urgent civic matter that we need to attend to. Since fulfilling civic purposes through the cultivation of citizenry is a mandated goal of formal education, we may rightly turn to our schooling for this urgent mission of resisting instrumentalism and economism. Hence, this should be the supreme educational objective we need to adopt and enact at this historical juncture.

Battling against instrumentalism, however, is not a just matter of undertaking practical measures like recycling and reusing things. Nor is it a matter of consuming less. While these practical measures do help considerably, they do not go to the heart of the matter or the bottom of the problem, for the underlying trouble is the way we regard and treat the world. It is a metaphysical problem that requires a critical and imaginative examination and re-visioning. In other words, it is not so much changing the world (we indeed have changed the world more than it can tolerate!), but changing ourselves. In our present context, what needs changing is our instrumentalist perception that sees the world as a warehouse for our consumption and as a waste sink. This perception has its home in our conventional objectivist, dualistic apperception of the world and ourselves. I say 'apperception' (or, 'understanding') but not 'knowledge' here because 'knowledge' is often understood in intellectual, that is, discursive, abstract, disembodied ways, whereas the meaning I am after includes perception, emotion, dispositions, and the body. The transformation we are seeking has to occur at all levels and dimensions of our being, from perception to action. This is where the transformative power of art comes in. Art has the power, because it is multi-dimensional, to engage and transform the whole person: body, mind, heart, soul, spirit, or however we may want to express the different dimensions of our being. In particular, art can shift or re-orient our perception from an instrumentalist to an intrinsic valuation.

In the following section, I talk about the difficulties of overcoming the objectivist paradigm. Given the entrenchment of this paradigm, we face a formidable challenge, and thus understanding the nature of this challenge will better prepare us to meet it.

## Exploding Dualism

Conventionally, we think of beauty as the property of a thing. Hence we speak of the beauty of things. We then go on thinking about the nature of this property, which is what we usually mean by aesthetics. But this way of thinking of beauty is epistemologically untenable for the simple reason that it is meaningless to speak of beauty outside human experience. Beauty is a quality of experience, and experience is neither subjectivist ("all is in one's head") nor objectivist ("it's out there). To characterize experience as either subjectivist or objectivist lands us in an epistemological conundrum from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It is better not to subscribe to the objectivist-subjectivist dualism to begin with. We may speak *as if* beauty is a property of things, but, in order not

to commit an epistemological nonsense, we should understand this property-talk only subjunctively: *as if* things have beauty. Strictly speaking, beauty is not a property of anything, just as colour is not a property of things. Subscribing to this understanding commits us to a more general epistemological position of the inseparability of the perceiver and the perceived. In experience, there is never a perceiver independent of the perceived, and vice versa. To speak of experience is to speak of the perceiver and the perceived as an inseparable unity. Experience is this unity. The perceiver and the perceived are not two separate, independent entities, and the perception is not something that the perceiver does to the perceived (the process known as 'representation'). The perceiver and the perceived, that we conventionally speak of as two separate entities, are co-emergent aspects of a single process. If they were separate entities, then, we should be able to catch the perceiver apart from the perceived, and vice versa. But this is never the case. In the act of perception, the perceiver and the perceived arise together simultaneously. What this means is not that an act of coordination is occurring between two separate entities, but that it is ultimately impossible to separate the perceiver and the perceived because they are co-emergent. We can use all kinds of analogies to illustrate the meaning here: a physical object and its shadow; what is inside and what is outside; skin and the flesh underneath. In all these instances, what we have is the phenomenon whereby we conventionally speak of things as if they are separate, self-contained, independent entities.

But, "Hold on!" interjects a voice of ordinary perception, also known as realism. "If experience is necessarily an event of unity, how come we actually experience the perceiver and the perceived to be two separate entities? For example, I am seeing a catalpa tree yonder in my backyard, and I have no illusion that I am sitting here and the tree is standing there, and that we are two separate organisms. I am not a tree; the catalpa tree yonder is not me! The catalpa has no idea who I am; it has no access to the pain I am suffering from just now. I sure don't feel like a tree, let alone that particular tree yonder. As far as I am concerned, the tree and I are two distinctly separate entities. My existence may be contingently affected by it, but I certainly am not essentially constituted by it. If the tree were cut down today, I might feel upset and sad, but I remain the same person. The same goes for the tree."

Let us engage the voice of ordinary perception in an epistemological debate. Getting started may be a struggle, though, since what is required to seriously enter into an epistemological debate is the very understanding that how we see the world and act in it is a matter of

conceptual enframing. In other words, we need epistemology in order to enter into an epistemological discussion! But this is not an impossible situation, as it might at first appear, thanks to that marvelous capacity we all are potentially capable of, namely self-reflexivity. Here, I do not mean a formalized, articulated analytic understanding of our cognition, which constitutes the formal study of epistemology. Rather, I have in mind something much more basic and general, namely, being able to recognize, however intuitively, that how one apprehends the world is just one possibility among an infinite number of others and that these possibilities depend greatly on points of view facilitated by socio-historical, cultural frames. Although I posited this recognition here as a basic and general human capacity, this awareness is probably not too easy to come by because of the fact our cognition is normatized. One apperceives and apprehends the world in a certain way precisely because this way has been normatized in oneself as an individual. The very fact that the world appears this or that way rather than one sees the world as this or that is evidence of normatization. Yet we are not completely locked into normatization. As soon as we see different possibilities of normatization, the spell of normatization is broken. This is precisely what happens when people of different norms of perception and comprehension come together and open-mindedly and open-heartedly explore and compare their differences. Now, this process does not come easily or naturally and achieving it should be a critically important educational effort.

Returning to the tree example earlier, when the ordinary perception person (realist) encounters someone who feels a deep resonance with trees, there is the possibility of both of them realizing that how each person apperceives the world is contingent upon a confluence of various normative conditionings that typically occur along the line of sex, gender, class, culture, religion, ideology and so on. When such realization takes hold of individuals, they are freed from metaphysical realism, that is, the notion that how the world appears to one is how the world is, and its dogma of objectivism, that is, there is a world out there, independent of our perception and conception. One no longer thinks naively that how the world appears to one is how the world objectively is and that if the world appears differently to others, they are stupid, crazy, or immoral, or all three altogether. When it arrives at such conclusions, metaphysical realism can cause terrible atrocities and destruction.

Intellectually recognizing that metaphysical realism is operating within us is one thing and overcoming it in practice is another. While the former would help one to achieve the latter, actual overcoming, if desired, is often a stupendous task, requiring dedicated effort, resources

and support. For example, how can a person who has no feelings of kinship and resonance with the trees entertain, not just abstractly, but concretely and experientially, sentiments of kinship and resonance? Fortunately or unfortunately, we have no cognitive switch that we can turn on to experience one mode of apperception and turn off to create another. In the absence of such a switch, there is only the laborious path of skilful practice whereby individuals undertake transformative activities that shift their cognitive frames. This is where the arts come in.

## The Case of Zen Arts

All those who are serious about art acknowledge its tremendous transformative power exerted on those who engage in it. "Art," declares Raimundo Pannikar, "is that which articulates life and brings it all together by the 'artistic' creation of the person" (p. 242). Ellen Dissanayake speaks of art as "making special" (Dissanayake, 1992). Many others have expressed a similar view. What exactly is art's transformative power? How does that work? Here I offer a Zen account which, although particular to the Zen tradition, contains an essence of the arts' transformative power.

The effort of Zen may be summed up in one statement: to overcome our discursive consciousness that gives rise to reification. Reification means, simply put, seeing the world through abstract categories and mistaking the latter for reality itself. The well-known Zen metaphor of mistaking the finger that points to the moon for the moon itself perfectly captures the meaning of reification. Now, what is the problem with reification, apart from the fact that a mistake is committed? We may hold the view that mistakes are fine so long as they add to the quality of life. Being a pragmatist of some variety myself, I can go along with this view. But the problem with reification is that it feeds metaphysical realism and attendant objectification. Reification is seeing the world through conceptual categories that, if not carefully seen through, gives the seer the illusion that reality inherently comes in these categories. Categories are, by nature, discontinuous, dichotomous, linear, and most often, dualistic. Hence, in seeing reality through categories, we risk the ability to see the intrinsic connectedness behind all phenomena and phenomenal beings (an ability that ecological consciousness demands). In particular, we risk the ability to see the co-arising of the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object.

Zen is the realm of experience wherein the ordinary subject-object dualism is replaced by subject-object non-dual unity. Zen art refers to any



art that is practiced in a way that aims at overcoming duality and achieving nonduality. Hence, there are no particular and exclusive Zen arts, although there are classically developed ones like the tea ceremony (chanoyu), haiku poetry, archery, and so on. Any human endeavour that is undertaken in the spirit of or in pursuit of nonduality can be a Zen art. For this reason, Zen art encompasses an incredible range of art and craft practices. Old and new, they all aim at overcoming our discursivity and achieving nonduality.

The discursive mind or consciousness is a languaged mind. While no one will deny that language is truly a distinguishing feature of humanity and that we owe much of our civilization's stupendous achievements to it, we tend to forget that, as is typical, behind every success is a hidden cost, which signals a failure in other ways. The hidden cost to the discursive mind is our inability to sink deep into and feel embedded in, or be one with, reality. The discursive mind is the intellect. Intellect objectifies reality, thereby abstracting and separating the self from it. The self stands outside (which is the literal meaning of 'existence'—*ex sistere*), that is, dualized from, reality. It then intellectually processes reality in conceptual categories. When this happens, reality retreats to the background of our consciousness and concepts or notions step into the foreground as substitutes. So long as we reside in intellection—that is, the plane of the discursive—we are not in touch with reality. How do we know when we are in touch with reality? Discursive explanations are no good for non-discursive experience! It is better to go to the poets, both ancient and modern, for evocative, provocative expressions of this ineffable, non-discursive knowing. Here are some samples:

When one sees with ears  
and hears with eyes.  
one cherishes no doubts.  
How naturally the raindrops  
fall from the leaves!<sup>5</sup>

...

Taste the still air,  
hear the still water: new leaves  
will spring from the doorpost.  
Plum and bamboo will rise through you.  
Snowflakes and stones will set roots  
through your shoulders and hands.<sup>6</sup>

What a stillness!  
Deep into the rock sinks  
the cicada's shrill.<sup>7</sup>



rain circle

Altogether it is best not to even try to give a precise, that is, discursively articulate, description of what the nondual experience is like or how the

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<sup>5</sup> This verse by Daito (1282-1337) is cited by Suzuki Teitaro Daisetz, "Self the Unattainable," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, Ed. Frederick Franck, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 19.

<sup>6</sup> This is the last stanza of "Hong Zicheng" by Robert Bringhurst, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (Toronto: The Canadian Publishers, 1986), 45.

<sup>7</sup> This is a much celebrated haiku by Basho cited by: H. Hammitsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* (P. Lemesurier, Trans.) (New York: Arkana, 1979), 87.

world would appear when one is in the state of Zen, it is nonetheless useful to provide some provocative and evocative ideas and a sense about the experience to the reader, so that he or she can decide to pursue it or not. Still, given our penchant for substituting explanations and descriptions for the real experience, we should insist (Loy, 1996, p. 92) that one's effort and time is better spent in actually undertaking a practice that will lead one to Zen. In other words, Zen scholarship is not the point but Zen practice is. To repeat, discursive knowledge about Zen is useful only for the purpose and to the extent, first, of persuading ourselves of the merit of doing Zen, and second, of aiding the practice.

All Zen arts fundamentally boil down to the double-edged effort: putting the discursive mind to rest and opening up the consciousness entirely to the immediacy of the encountered world. These two aspects are interdependent; one supports the other. But what do these two mean? Putting the discursive mind to rest is about freeing oneself from the tyranny of the languaged consciousness. This is how the peerless Buddhist dialectician of the fifth century, Nargajuna, put it: "Ultimate serenity is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things." More metaphorically captured, it is to see with the ears and to hear with eyes, as Daito put it. It is to free the senses from the tether of the intellect. To sample an entirely different approach, here is Schopenhauer's exhaustive explication of the process. He is indeed pushing the very limits of discursive explication on a topic that, ironically, defies it.

. . . a man relinquishes the common way of looking at things, gives up tracing, under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, their relations to his own will; if he thus ceases to consider the where, then when, the why, and the whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the what; if, further, he does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of the reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, sinks himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with the quiet contemplation of the natural object actually present. . . ; inasmuch as he loses himself in this object . . . (Schopenhauer, 1983, p. 231)

Schopenhauer's council is echoed by Soetsu Yanagi who gives this advice on the cultivation of artistic perception:

First, put aside the desire to judge immediately; acquire the habit of just looking. Second, do not treat the object as an object for the intellect. Third,

just be ready to receive, passively, without interposing yourself. (Yanagi, 1972, p. 112)

Normally, our sense perception is very much driven by conceptualization. This is evidence by the phenomenon that Wittgenstein has called ‘aspect-seeing’ (Wittgenstein, 1976). In aspect-seeing, we do not just see things but see them as this or that. This is our ordinary seeing. When we encounter a tree, we briefly register this perception by the name ‘tree,’ and we continue on our way. We have abstractly, categorically, processed the percept. But if we stop in front of the tree, gaze at it, and enter into a silent communion, having filled our consciousness entirely with the tree in all its sensuousness, then this is a profoundly different experience of seeing. The difference lies in the feel of the experience; in the former, the perceiver does not feel a communion with the perceived, whereas in the latter communion does occur.

This difference is explained by Frederick Franck as that between looking and seeing. Most often we look, but we do not see. Seeing requires something more than cognitively registering percepts, and this something more has to do with the quality of attention. This is how he illustrates the quality of attention:

Driving through the redwoods of California I see ‘timber,’ until I stop and sit down in front of one tree and start drawing it, with or without pen or paper. (Franck, 1963, p. 109)

The process of intense, concentrated, undivided attention directed to the tree has the effect of breaking down the discursive division between the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object. When perception is no longer filtered through the subject-object duality, what occurs experientially is a tremendous release of psychic energy in the form of sensing aliveness everywhere. The universe is alive, is animate, is brimming with life, even down to pebbles and grains of sand. The opposite of the animate universe is the mechanical universe, a picture of the universe that has prevailed since the seventeenth century, thanks to such giants of the mind as Descartes, Hobbs, and Bacon. In the mechanical universe, the only entity truly alive in itself is the human mind—the seat of intellect, not even the body which is just the container of the mind. The human body is a machine made of flesh. Whatever is not seen as possessing intellect is put into the category of inert matter. To inert matter, we have no ethical obligations, of course. We can do whatever we want to our advantage and amusement. This is how utterly

instrumental towards the world we have become. We think nothing of chopping down trees, clearing the land, draining rivers, causing species go extinct. . . Why should we care about these “things” when they are nothing but inert matters? It is only when the perceived is seen as alive and intrinsically valuable that we would think twice about violating its integrity and destroying it.



The catch here is that when the perceived is not seen as alive, then, by association, the perceiver herself tends to become devitalized. After all, despite the perceiver’s understanding that she is categorically separate from the perceived, a mutual influence or resonance takes place in psychological reality, and whatever the perceiver thinks of the perceived has an influence on the perceiver herself. Thus, for example, if the perceiver sees the world through the lens of the Cartesian mechanical

universe, then this manner of perception will psychically deaden the perceiver sooner or later. One is then caught in a vicious circle of a positive feedback loop: the more one sees the world as a de-animated place, the more one is oneself de-animated; and the more one is de-animated, the more the world appears de-animated, and so on. Civilizationally, we have reached such an advanced point of de-animation that we see no life in mountains, rivers, rocks, and the air. For many people, not even in trees. And for some, not even in animals. This is how Thomas Berry evocatively describes the situation:

The thousandfold voices of the natural world suddenly became inaudible to the human. The mountains and rivers and the wind and the sea all became mute insofar as humans were concerned. The forests were no longer the abode of an infinite number of spirit presences but were simply so many board feet of lumber to be “harvested” as objects to be used for human benefit. Animals were no longer the companions of humans in the single community of existence. (Berry, 1996, p. 410)

Zen as practice is about re-animating our consciousness so that “new leaves will spring from the doorpost” (Berry, 1996, p. 410). Zen arts are concrete, sensuous ways to accomplish this re-animation of the self and the universe. The key to Zen arts is, to repeat, resting or arresting the hyperactive intellect by means of complete absorption in what is perceived or experienced. What results is intensification of consciousness through concentrated and sustained attention. All Zen arts provide ways to achieve this intensified consciousness. Such consciousness is no longer divided into the subject and the object, the perceiver and the perceived. The two poles of perception are integrated into a seamless unity, and as a result, a tremendous sense of vitality is released. This is how we re-animate the universe. This is the way to heal our sense of existential alienation and numbing which drives us more and more to such pathological behaviour as treating the world as if it had no life of its own and existed solely for the human consumption and wastage. Panikkar states: “We do not only torture animals—and Men, if we include politics. We torture Matter as well.” (Panikkar, p. 244) This sums up very well the kind of damaging presence we humans have been bestowing upon the planet.

## Epilogue

The problem with our discursive mind or intellect is not so much that we have it at all but that we are over-relying on it. What we have is the hyperactivity of the discursive. As a civilization, we are quite addicted to it. This addiction has a terrible side effect, namely the marginalization or loss of the nondual mind which is the source of animated perception. To see the world as alive, having its own life and integrity, and to see ourselves as one with this animated, consecrated world: this is the task of the arts as understood in the Zen traditions.

I have argued in this essay that the arts have to be understood and undertaken in a more serious light than they conventionally have been in order for them to become a powerful medicine that heals the malaise of instrumentalism. That instrumentalism is a malaise, and that the arts have the power to overcome it, is an idea that needs to be appreciated widely by everyone, not only those who work with arts, such as art teachers and their students, but also school administrators, parents, and Ministry folks who shape and make decisions about the future of arts education. The biggest obstacle to this appreciation is the prevalent perception that the arts in schools are primarily for recreational or specialized career purposes. In this essay, I used Zen arts to illustrate how the arts can be a healing medicine for instrumentalism. I am aware that the case I am making for the arts here is not a widely shared view, and hence it requires an effort of making a case to educators, parents, and the public in general. This is the natural task of philosophy.

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