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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BODY IN TRADITIONAL EAST ASIAN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

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“Why do those philosophically rich and critically reflective somaesthetic disciplines that are central to Asian philosophy remain so foreign to our Western philosophical work?”

(Shusterman 1999, 310)

I.

Traditional East Asian teachings and practices are notoriously hard to label accurately and to categorize properly from a Western point of view, given the thoroughly alien nature of the classifying “enlightened” Western mind to the deeply-rooted traditions of the Orient. This all-pervasive, systematizing, scientific trend of the Occident prefers to think in perfectly discrete concepts and categories, whereas Eastern traditions are more inclined to leave the demarcation line between various, interrelated phenomena – such as religion, philosophy, politics, etc. – rather dim. Hence, it comes as no surprise when, in reaction to the seemingly impossible demand of molding Eastern notions into appropriate Western conceptual forms, some overly broad, thus virtually meaningless, categories emerge. One of these categories is the widely misused container word of ‘spirituality’ for Eastern traditions. Without going very deep into the problematic nature of this word, let me just point out that the application of this particular expression as an umbrella term to encompass traditional Asian philosophies and religions is doubly wrong: first, because it suggests that these traditions are to be conceived as “spiritual”, that is, as *not bodily*; second, it ties the fundamentally different Eastern sensitivity and sensibility to the specifically Christian notion of spirit and spirituality. Misconception and misunderstanding is therefore readily available.

Yet, if we take a closer look at the presuppositions and

categories that I have been using 37nt he previous paragraph, it might also be suggested – deservedly, I should add – that the usage of East and West, Orient and Occident are just as well Western notions themselves, which have an ever shifting web of meanings.¹ I admit I wouldn’t disagree with such criticism. These notions are, indeed, quite dubious. However, from a practical point of view, they are still very useful, because they help us to recognize the differences between our “natural” presuppositions and those coming from different world views. For us, Westerners, language (*logos*) essentially orients the ways we conceive our reality. I would not go as far to suggest that this is entirely dissimilar for East Asian peoples. Language does feature a privileged role in China, Korea, and in Japan, as well. 37nt he is also striking to me that there is another, often overlooked reality which seems to orient the people of the Orient far more than most of us would imagine. The reality of which I am alluding to is that of the *body*.

I would argue that the body, its operation and its relation to one’s moods and emotions, to the thoughts and even to one’s ‘rational decision making processes’ has a central role 37nt he East Asian experience. I would

¹ The terms ‘Orient’ and ‘Oriental’ used to refer to Asia Minor and the Middle East in Roman times, then later to Central Asia, at times, to India as well, and it only came to designate the „Far East” (China, Korea, Japan) in relatively recent times. ‘West’ or the ‘Occident’ for Westerners is their natural vantage point from where they constitute their own visions of the world, including that of the „Far East”. But for East Asian people „Far East” is neither East, nor too far, since they actually live there. The ‘West’ for them may seem just as homogenous as „the East” to Western people. Whereas, in reality there are many Occidents and many Orients. That is the reason why in the title of this paper I use the term ‘Orient’ in a plural form: ‘Orients’, for it seems to me more reasonable to differentiate between several origins of (East) Asian thought and practice (Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, etc.) than to handle it as a single monolithic structure. In the same vein, there is clearly not only one ‘Occident’ but numerous ones: Europe as a whole is different from Western Europe (which, in turn, is comprised of many very distinctive cultural traditions), just as much as America is different from Europe (not to mention that America does *not* equal to the United States, either). Nevertheless, all of these can be seen in the eyes of an East Asian person as a single indivisible and uniform culture of *the West*.

also argue that it has a far more decisive role than 38nt he Western religious and philosophical traditions, not only because the East is more reluctant to separate the somatic realm from one's mental experiences but also because the experiencing of reality is prone to be more aestheticized there, that is, more conscious in acknowledging the sensory perceptions *qua* bodily perceptions, not merely as 'pictures' or 'ideas' appearing 'in' one's mind. Knowledge is the knowledge of the mind *and* of the body, not exclusively of the mind. Consequently, in this paper I do not limit the term 'aesthetic experience' to a special theoretical attunement of enjoying arts, but I will use 'aesthetic' in its more original sense of gaining knowledge through the deliberate reflection on our sensory experiences. The body might have been considered 38nt he West as a burden that hinders the attainment of 'true knowledge', but for Eastern traditions no wisdom could be imaginable without the participation of the body 38nt he seeking process. I will therefore present the major East Asian traditions' views 38nt he body in terms of its contributions to shaping aesthetic experience and acquiring practical insights and valuable knowledge in this process.

II.

The major East Asian traditions to be presented here are the following: Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. I will proceed in this order, starting on Buddhism, by offering a concise account on its early days in India. Then the examination will move on to the two indigenous Chinese traditions, Confucianism and Daoism. Eventually, I will compare these three divergent teachings, and show their interplays and mutual transformations during the centuries of living together in China, Korea and Japan, with relation to the meanings and tasks of the body in forming aesthetic experience. Buddhism is usually characterized as *the* prominent religion of East Asia. Initially, however, it was neither a

religion, nor did it originate from East Asia. As A. N. Whitehead aptly put it: Buddhism was a "*metaphysic generating a religion*". (Whitehead 1960, 50) Historically speaking, at its establishment, Buddhism was nothing more than a remarkably comprehensive theory and practice worked out in Northern India by a single individual, named Gautama Siddhartha (later to be called 'the Buddha', the 'enlightened one'). The cultural context from which Buddhism arose was the multifaceted and extremely rich and colorful mixture of Indian religions and philosophies. In this tradition, the practice of meditation and yoga had been already prevalent by the time the Buddha appeared, albeit at that time it had had rather close ties with ascetic tendencies (that is, with the denial of the body, which provided occasions for self-mortification). The Buddha himself also practiced self-mortification for several years before becoming enlightened. As he recognized the futility of such exercises, in his subsequent teachings significant attention was given to the vital importance of the body in attaining relevant aesthetic experiences. He preferred to call his teaching the 'middle way', precisely because it refused both the extremes of self-mortification and indulging in excessive sensual pleasures. The practice of meditation is arguably the cornerstone of his teachings.

One might ask: what does meditation have to do with aesthetic experience? The straightforward answer is that meditation is the *par excellence* aesthetic experience in Buddhism. For the uninitiated, the word 'meditation' would seem to imply the 'mind's withdrawal' from the physical realm, and the resulting 'leaving behind of the body'. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. As Heinrich Dumoulin, the prominent Christian Buddhologist remarked: "*The body is as central to Buddhist meditation as to Yoga. Indeed meditation without the body is unknown to the Eastern religions.*" (Dumoulin 1994, 88) Meditation is, in fact, the bringing into awareness of the body ('*kaya*') and its functioning

via the keen observation of one of the most basic automatic and unconscious functions of the body: the respiration. Meditation begins with paying acute attention to one's one breathing without trying to control or interfere with it in any way. But even prior to that, one must find the proper position for meditating. The general image of a meditator is a person sitting in a classic lotus position. Yet, meditation can be practiced in a range of other forms and positions as well, such as while walking, standing or lying. In the most authoritative text on mindfulness and meditation, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha explains that body awareness is the key to seeing the world as it is. "One thing, O monks, developed and repeatedly practiced, leads to the attainment of wisdom. It is the contemplation of the body." (Smith and Novak 2003, 81)

The Buddha provides several examples of body mindfulness. These include:

- (1) Mindfulness of the breathing (directing full attention to breathing, nothing else)
- (2) Mindfulness of basic body postures (becoming aware of one's bodily positions)
- (3) Mindfulness of constant change in bodily activities (awareness of the way we move)
- (4) Mindfulness of the decay of the body (awareness of the impermanent nature of the body)

But this is just the beginning of mindfulness meditation. As soon as one gets accustomed to calmly observing his/her bodily movements, then can he/she start monitoring the body sensations that take place in different parts of his/her body. What is crucial here, just as in any other mindfulness practices, is the dispassionate attitude which one must adopt as the basic state of mind towards all his/her observations. The aim of all these exercises is, after all, nothing else than to be able to see everything with tranquil equanimity. The state of this superior equanimity is called *vipassana*, that

is, 'penetrative seeing', which enables one to witness the true nature of reality: its insubstantiality, its unsatisfactoriness and its impermanence. The existential realization of these three basic truths of Buddhism is what meditation is all about, so to speak. It wouldn't be possible without the acknowledgement and, as it were, the taking advantage of the centrality of the body as the locus of the modified aesthetic experience. This heightened awareness of the subtleties of one's aesthetic experience is, in effect, a tool or a means for metaphysical insights. As the Buddha himself described this landmark-experience:

"Those truths of which before I had only heard, now I dwell having experienced them directly within the body, and I observe them with penetrating insight." (Smith and Novak 2003, 83)

III.

It took about five centuries for Buddhism to arrive in China after the Buddha's death. By that time, the Buddhist Dharma had changed and evolved quite a bit, and we will take this into consideration in the fifth section of this paper. As for now, however, our focus will turn to the predominant body concepts of China, which were native to the Chinese culture much before any foreign influence could have worked out its effects there. The two vastly influential and often competing local traditions of China are Confucianism and Daoism. "It is often assumed that many Chinese are Confucians in action, and Taoists in contemplation." (Ching 1993, 85) To put this in another way, whereas the daily life of social interaction is fairly well covered by the meticulous regulations of Confucianism, private 'spiritual' life may be taken better care for many by Daoism. We will see how 'spiritual' the 'spirituality' of Daoism really is in the next section. However, the teachings of Confucius, who lived around the same time in China as the Buddha did in India, are everything but 'spiritual'. He was a deeply practical thinker who is well known for his reluctance in dealing with religious issues *per se*, and was not much

interested in gods or spirits in general. Instead he was rather fond of referring back to his ancestors' times, and the mores of that – the early Zhou dynasty's – era. What has been all so often and mistakenly attributed to Confucius, the ancestor worship, was actually a much older tradition, antedating the philosopher by at least a thousand years. Although Confucius did not invent the ancestral rituals, he reinforced them by preserving and mediating important ancient anthologies, such as the *I Ching*, which was already an antique text in his time. In these ancient rituals, one can already detect the significance of the body in ritual activities. For instance, when paying ceremonial respect to one's deceased ancestors, the son had to act as the family priest, and the grandson or a nephew was appointed to serve as a *corpse* ('shi'), an ancestral impersonator whose body would be the vessel or the carrier of the ancestor's soul during the ceremony. (Ching 1993, 20)

Body for ancient Chinese was a psychosomatic unity, which, for Confucius and his followers was firmly embedded in its immediate social environment: one's body was a part of his family's body, which was, in turn, part of an ever expanding series of 'bodies': of tribes, clans, and ultimately, of the entire Chinese society. Therefore the cultivation of the self, which was a primary imperative for the Confucian ideal of the learned gentleman, was, in essence, the cultivation of the body, in the sense of developing and refining one's character through a fundamentally aesthetic education of rituals. Interestingly though, the typical Chinese scholar did not carry the cultivation of his body to excesses. The reason for this was another Confucian imperative, that of the prohibition of harming one's own body, for it was held that one's body did not rightfully belong to himself, but rather to his parents (the body is a gift from the parents for which one can never cease to be grateful and responsible). Being cautious and refraining from overdoing bodily exercises lead Chinese Confucian scholars to become physically rather

untrained (but skilled at courtly manners and rituals), whereas, at the same time, the Japanese samurais, who blended Neo-Confucianism with Zen Buddhism, were well known for their excellent physical fitness. At any rate, Confucians did not believe in personal immortality, as they held that "*at death a person disintegrates; with its yang soul returning to heaven and its yin soul to earth, the individual as a distinct entity is no more.*" (Lai 2001, 71)

In the *Great Learning*, one of the most highly regarded Confucian classics, one can read about the *xiu shen*, which is usually translated as 'self-cultivation', to be the ultimate concern for every single individual of the society, irrespective of their class or rank. However, the term *xiu shen* literally means the cultivation ('xiu') of the human *body* ('shen'). As Ellen Zhang explains, for most Confucians the human body is not an autonomous entity, but the part of the natural world: it exists in a cosmological, as well as in a social nexus. Not only does the body belong to the cosmos, but it also shares the same governing energy (the *qi*) that flows through all other entities and realms of the universe as well. The human body thus takes after Heaven and Earth and all other beings in its basic characteristics. "*More specifically, the human being is an embodiment of the basic five elements, (wu wu); that is, water, fire, earth, metal, and wood.*" (Zhang 2002, 46) When the five elements are out of balance, sickness occurs in the human body (which brings about the illness of the mind, too, since body and mind are so tightly intertwined). Likewise, when these identical five elements are not in accordance with one another in society, unrest and chaos takes place in the social body, too. This Confucian approach to the human body is the fundament for Chinese medicine which also claims that there is an internal connection between one's mind and body. It also maintains that equilibrium is to be retained by balancing the two opposing natural forces – the *yin* and the *yang* – that are present in the human body, as well

as in everywhere else in the cosmos. In addition, on this basis it is also believed that physical and mental health are conjoined with morality. Consequently, an immoral person is thought to be sick in his entire being. This holistic approach will pave the way for fascinating somaesthetic developments in Neo-Confucianism, which is to be investigated shortly. But now is the time to turn our attention to the body concepts of the other dominant Chinese tradition: Daoism.

IV.

To begin with, it is helpful to note that Daoism may refer to two fairly different cultural phenomena: one being the Daoist philosophy (*Daojia*), and the other being the Daoist religion (*Daojiao*). These are not the most appropriate designations to tell the two apart, for both its philosophy contains a cluster of religious elements, while the religious movement is thoroughly permeated by Daoist metaphysics and ethics. Still, it is a useful distinction to be made because Daoism came into being as a highly sophisticated philosophical approach that grew and sprung from the same fertile soil as did Confucianism, but has become during its subsequent history more institutionalized and religious in its character. Its first master, Laozi lived around the same time as did Confucius, and allegedly the two had even met on a few occasions; although this claim lacks historical evidence. Then again, there is no doubt that just as *yin* and *yang* are two opposing but complementary forces of the Chinese cosmological thought, so are Daoism and Confucianism two similarly complementary major powers of the Chinese intellectual universe. *Yin* is normally associated with Daoism, being more feminine, yielding, passive and dark, whereas *yang* is related to Confucianism, to the masculine, the active, aggressive and light.

We saw that Confucianism contributed a great deal to Chinese medicine. As a matter of fact, Daoism, which absorbed the teachings of the Yin and Yang School, did

at least as much for the expansion of knowledge of the body (anatomy) and for the improvement of healing practices. In addition, Daoism is famed for its elaboration on martial arts and its unique breathing techniques (*qigong*) as well. The guiding principle in all these various disciplines was introduced in the very first Daoist text, the *Daodejing* written by Laozi himself. This guiding principle is called *wu-wei*, literally 'non-action', but might be better understood as 'effortless action'. As Julia Ching puts it: "*It does not signify the absence of action, but rather, acting without artificiality, also without over-action, without attachment to action itself.*" (Ching 1993, 89) In short, this principle implies going with the natural flow of things, letting the individual enjoy and experience the ordinary aspects of life, without straining the body too much. Indeed, according to Laozi, the senses and passions need purification and moderation, because overindulgence in pleasures is evidently harmful to them. (*Daodejing*, Ch. 12)

The second great figure of Daoism is Zhuangzi, who celebrated reclusion from the greater communities, and withdrawal from unnecessary social pressures. He emphasized the inner power of the self which can liberate one from self-interested inclinations and prejudices. According to him, self-transcendence is only possible by embracing the *Dao*, the natural flow of things. For Daoism, the ideal is not the educated scholar who is an extensively learned and erudite person, but the sage who learns only one lesson: how to forget the unimportant things in life. The sage in Zhuangzi² is no longer affected by emotional turmoil or any sort of inner or outer uncertainty, for he trained himself to regard life and death with equal equanimity. In fact, the sage or the 'perfect man' lives in such perfect accordance with nature, that he cannot be conquered by death any longer; he acquires supernatural powers, and uses these powers to help others to overcome sickness and other

² The person and the book written by the person are both called *Zhuangzi*.

vicissitudes. The doctrine of the 'perfect men' gave rise to the immortality cult within Daoism, with its avid search for the elixir of life. This had become so influential by the time the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), that the tomb of founder of the dynasty was found to be surrounded by specially designed 'mercury rivers' in order to keep the body of the deceased ruler intact.³ (Ching 1993, 91)

Zhuangzi was not only the initiator of the immortality cult but also the one who laid down the foundations of Daoist meditation exercises. He taught that absolute bliss is only possible if one moves past the commonplace distinction of self and the universe, and in a mystico-aesthetic experience becomes one with the Dao. This experience supposedly endows one with a higher level of knowledge of the basic metaphysical unity of reality. Nevertheless, this special wisdom cannot be attained by discursive learning, but only by forgetting; forgetting all previous knowledge, and particularly, the knowledge of the self. Zhuangzi mentions *tso-wang* or 'sitting in oblivion' which is the exercise of purging the mind of its contents and to prepare it for the distinctive direct experience of 'emptiness' (*wu*). The practice of special breathing techniques and sitting meditation would bloom in religious Daoism, to which we will turn in the next section, along with the developments of Neo-Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism.

V.

Religious Daoism as a social movement grew out of philosophical Daoism, and became one of the three chief traditions that shaped the bodily conceptions of the peoples of East Asia. It is easy to see how and why Buddhism could find a new home in China due to its affinities to Daoist concepts and their shared concerns

regarding human life. Buddhist and Daoist meditation and breathing exercises, the emphatic focus on witnessing of the metaphysical emptiness or nothingness of reality, which points beyond everyday aesthetic experience, along with the acknowledgement of the centrality of the body in attaining 'spiritual' goals, places them on the same platform. Despite all their similarities it is nonetheless also true, that no matter how much they had influenced and shaped one another during the long centuries of coexistence, and though both incorporated some of the doctrines of the other tradition, on one of the most essential points they could never agree; namely, whether human life is in itself satisfactory or not. For Buddhists, life is not and cannot ever be satisfactory: this is essentially to what the Buddha's teaching boils down. Life is suffering, and the purpose of attaining *nirvana* through strict physical training is to enable one to leave the *samsara*, that is, the endless circle of life and death, for good. Daoism, on the other hand, stresses the importance of striving to become immortal with the help of equally strict physical exercises. Daoists, like Confucians, believe that the person's mind is intrinsically tied to his/her body, and they regard this body in high esteem, holding that it was modeled after the universe (the body is conceived as a microcosm). The Chinese yoga or *qigong* applies acupuncture to clear the energy points or meridians of the body in order to keep its energy flow (*qi*) in balance. The ultimate goal of *qigong* and meditation is assisting one to gain a special vision of the life energy (this is called the 'visualization of the *qi*') and of the various benevolent gods that can visit one's body, sometimes with the use of transformative sexual experiences, so that one could produce a perfect, immortal body (by this 'inner alchemy'), and discover his 'true self' that reunites him/her with nature (Dao).

Neo-Confucianism, which was the official state ideology for a thousand years in China and for five hundred years in Korea up until the beginning of the 20th century, was a

³ „Chinese aristocrats made sure that their physical bodies would be protected from corruption, so that their 'souls' would remain with their bodies, and eventually attain immortality together.” (Ching 1993, 107)

reaction to the ‘mysticism’ and the allegedly ‘superstitious’ characters of both religious Daoism and Chinese Buddhism. As it vowed to compete with these two religions, it undertook the rationalization of its own tradition as well. As this process went along, interestingly, Neo-Confucianism came to syncretize and assimilate much of the teachings of its rivals. Thereby, it fused the doctrine of the ‘Supreme Ultimate’ (*tai ji*) with the concept of *xiu shen* (cultivation of the body or the self). Zhu Xi, who was one of the most prominent rationalist Neo-Confucian scholars, taught about the crucial importance of ‘reflective examination’ (*xing cha*) which may remind us both the Buddhist and the Daoist contemplative aesthetic experiences of meditation.

“For Zhu, one should keep examining the self in order to obtain the Principle of Nature and enter the sage-hood because to become a person with humanity (ren, that is, a high moral principle) requires the process of transforming the physical self by developing a heightened awareness of the self-body (feelings and intentions).”
(Zhang 2002, 49)

Gradually, other Daoist and Buddhist breathing techniques, meditative positions and body awareness practices also found their way to become part of the Neo-Confucian catalog. So much so, that they joined forces with the old Confucian idea of actualizing ethical behavior by externalizing morality via the ritual performances of the body. The body thus stepped forward as the focal point of moral, religious, metaphysical and epistemological inquiries; inquiries not akin to Buddhism, which had long held that the best way for understanding reality leads through the aesthetic experiences of the body. Since Buddhism was always conceived as an alien tradition within the borders of China, it had to face up to the challenges of living in a fundamentally different cultural milieu than of its origins. As Mahayana Buddhism became immensely popular and influential in China, its numerous sects and schools took on diverse forms of meditative practices, and most of them moved on to Korea and Japan, as well,

where they changed their forms once again. I will mention just some examples here. For instance Chán – which is known as Zen in Japan – concentrates on the clear-sighted perception of everyday realities because it is believed that the Buddha-nature is omnipresent; one only has to realize this. The sitting meditation or *zazen* is the typical position in which a Zen Buddhist attempts to reach the experience of the non-duality of the self, in other words, the union of body and mind. As Dōgen, the founder of the Sōtō Zen school put it: *“The attainment of the Way is truly accomplished with the body.”* (Dōgen 1971, 47) As a general rule, the Zen Buddhists refuse the primacy of canonical Buddhist texts. Instead their source of knowledge is the body itself. Another Mahayana school, The Pure Land highlights the significance of the visualization of the Amitābha Buddha (who is called Amida in Japan) and the Western Paradise where one is to be born after professing his faith in Amitābha. This aesthetic experience of visualization may seem already familiar to us because it is quite similar to the one performed in religious Daoism. Finally, just to mention a significant Tantric Buddhist school as well, Kūkai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism taught that the *mudras*, that is, the ritual gestures (such as the various symbolic gestures of the hand) are of prime importance in realizing the goal of meditation: our unity with the universe. *“From the endless cycle of samsāra how can we be freed? The only way is to practice meditation and correct thinking.”* (Kūkai 1972, 263)

VI.

The analysis of distinctive East Asian somatic practices could (and should) go on much longer but the limits of this paper do not allow us to proceed any further now. Some of the other representative fields to be investigated would involve the martial arts, the erotic arts, the diverse types of massage therapies, Japanese tea ceremonies and Noh drama, and so on, and so forth. As Richard Shusterman pointed out: *“open-minded*

Western thinking can learn from Asian philosophy and somatic techniques, while pragmatically developing such Asian insights well beyond their original context and use (...) Somaesthetics is a field that could expand philosophy beyond its conventional academic limits, while helping to nourish a rich and fruitful East-West dialogue." (Shusterman 2004, 38) As we have seen, there are plenty of areas to investigate and exploit from the Oriental traditions for the objectives of somaesthetics. Shusterman has already demonstrated, for instance, how well Chinese philosophical ideas can get along with the concepts of American pragmatism. (Shusterman, 2004) However, it is also worth noting that other Western philosophical approaches may also be able to contribute considerably to the understanding, mutual appreciation and to the increasing exchange of Asian, European and American ideas. One of these approaches could be, I believe, existential phenomenology which has an obvious affinity to and accord with both Buddhist⁴ and Daoist⁵ thought. In-depth examination of the philosophy of the Kyoto School, for example, would definitely yield a number of priceless insights of the interactions of East-West discourses, for the members of this school were both heavily influenced by German philosophy and Zen Buddhism. Therefore, I suggest that different Western approaches should work together hand in hand, in order to constitute a more complete, comprehensive, and more truthful picture of the East; that is, more truthful than those of the past which described Asia as a single, homogenous monolith, the land of the intuitive, mystical, and 'spiritual' Oriental wisdom.

⁴ Sartre's epistemology shows striking similarities with Buddhist interpretations of the self. See for example *Derek Heyman: Dual and non-dual ontology in Sartre and Mahayana Buddhism* (1997), or *Phra Medidhammaporn (Prayoon Mererk): Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism* (1995).

⁵ The later Heidegger's work on Mindfulness and Enowning (The Event), and even his earlier musings on the concept of nothingness have connections to both Buddhism and Daoism. On Heidegger's Asian links see *Reinhard May: Heidegger's Hidden Sources* (1996).

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