

Hamlet, a Study in Satori

BY TED GUHL

Part One

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time--as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest--O, I could tell you--
But let it be. (V.ii)

Perhaps the most popular (and least satisfying to those who are truly moved by the play) critical elaboration of the character of Hamlet has been that of the 'man of thought vrs. the man of action'. This perspective is appealing in that it explains, albeit superficially, why it takes Hamlet five acts to do the deed he promises at the beginning. I call this superficial because it avoids the undeniable emotional and spiritual development of Hamlet and focuses almost entirely on the intellectual. Recently, while attempting a more comprehensive look at this multifaceted character I accidentally hit upon some surprising parallels with, of all things, the concept of Satori and the steps by which a student of Zen might hope to arrive at such a state.

Of course, there are several obvious objections that such a comparison will invoke. First, that there can be no historical connection between Shakespeare and Zen (or any other Eastern practice). Second, that the fundamental cultural assumptions and philosophical constructs of the Eastern and Western traditions are entirely different. Third, that several Zen practices (meditation upon a koan for instance) have no exact counterpart in the life of Hamlet, or any other Shakespearean character.

Still, much value may be gained by such a comparative study if the first two of the above considerations are kept firmly in mind. I hope to show that the third objection may not be so certain. Further, if one can assume that, as is expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* (whose fundamental principles are incorporated in Zen) - "the paths are many, the truth is one" then, at least from that perspective such considerations are not entirely relevant in any case.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I,v)

Finally, if it can be shown that the character Hamlet demonstrates a state equivalent to satori in the final act, it should provide a new illumination of the inner life of the character as well as new insights into some of the more complex textual passages.

Let us begin with the assumption that Shakespeare himself had, at some point in his life, an experience equivalent to that which in Zen is called satori. Call it divine inspiration, grace, what you will. That a man of such genius would be aware of a spiritual condition as universal as the more mundane human conditions he gave voice to is entirely reasonable and has been commented on before. As British scholar, R.H. Blyth says in *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*: "Good is good and bad is bad, but both are necessary - the acceptance of this is the secret of Zen, the secret of Shakespeare."

Yet, if Shakespeare were consciously reflecting upon the process a person goes through to achieve a kind of satori, why would he use an esoteric form of expression? Why not, given his culture context use Catholicism or Protestantism to express this experience? The first answer is obviously that he was a

playwright and actor, not a clergyman. An even more compelling reason may have been that both of those religions weren't entirely suited to the task and were too fraught with dangers to be of much use. As Alan Watts comments in **The Way of Zen**: "It is especially difficult to find the right means of expression for the experience (of satori) in the cultural context of Christianity. For while this enlightenment comes just as much to Christians as to anyone else, the Christian mystic has always been in danger of conflict with the defenders of orthodoxy." Given the tensions between Christian sects in his time, and the fanatical posture of the Puritans, it is reasonable to assume that if Shakespeare wanted to express such spiritual understanding he would do it prudently, in a subtextual parable. Therefore, the paths and pitfalls of Hamlet can be seen as an esoteric illustration of a process that leads to enlightenment.

While we may assume that Shakespeare had some experience of 'enlightenment', it is crucial to this comparison that we offer substantial evidence from the script showing that the character Hamlet achieves, if only briefly, a state of transcendence equivalent to satori. Thus we must begin with a "definition" of such a state. The difficulty will be in giving shape to what Zen masters insist cannot be defined. In order to accomplish this we might look at how the state of "satori" has been communicated by two authoritative voices. According to D.T. Suzuki in **Zen Buddhism**: "Satori is a sort of inner perception - not the perception, indeed, of a single individual object but the perception of reality itself..." In other words one sees the world, including oneself, from a new, objective view-point; that is to say, one transcends oneself. The primary characteristic of the new way of seeing is that all things are as they are - not discernible as having discrete value. As E. Herrigel says in **Zen in the Art of Archery**: "All things are of equal importance in its sight, the most trivial as well as the most significant by ordinary human standards. ... revealing a relationship which does not obtain in the ordinary field of vision."

I might add that this is essentially an affirmative stance towards existence that accepts what 'is' regardless of moral or other societal values.

As these quotes provide us with a flavor, a partial 'picture' of this state, they also reveal some surprising correlations with Hamlet, as we see him in Act V Scene ii. Let's examine some of what Hamlet says in this final scene that might reflect the above: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." (V ii 220-221) While this is generally interpreted as a Christian reference that expresses the great plan of an ever watchful God, it can as easily be seen as an insight into the Zen concept of the interconnectedness of all things; the awareness that all things are equal and related to all other things. If we take into account the context, Hamlet's emotional state in this scene, as suggested by his calm and considered tone, is one of peaceful acceptance, rather than spiritual awe or supplication. He even expresses the recognition of his part in this "special providence".

If it be now, 'tis not to come;
if it be not to come, it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.
(V ii 221-224)

The rhythm, and repetition of line, in the above quote emphasize its fateful or metaphysical qualities, and the context (just prior to the final action) show us that Hamlet is clearly in a state where his own mortality, as well as whatever "action" may be required of him are no longer a source of great personal or moral concern. He accepts them as they come along. Yet, he is aware that he must be "ready". In other words, he knows that he alone is responsible for his own state of being. The flavor is clearly closer to Zen than to orthodox Christianity. Later, he speaks to Laertes of his unique perspective:

If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
The Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If it be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is
wronged..."(V.II.)

One obvious interpretation of the above is that this is a self-serving excuse for having killed Polonius; a sort of psychological rationalizing. While such an interpretation may have psychological justifications, it unnecessarily reduces the tragic quality of Act V by denying Hamlet any real growth of character; in fact it propels the audience back to the very beginning of the play, when Hamlet states that he will assume a madness.

Why not assume that Hamlet is telling the truth; that he has come to realize that, like all people who behave unconsciously, he has done damage to himself as well as others? This brings up the question, what is Hamlet's madness? We will look into this at some length later, but for now, if we interpret this line as a new and quite unusual way of looking at the world for Hamlet, one that radically transcends his previously egocentric view of himself, then we can perceive his state as equivalent to satori. At the same time, because of this radical growth in the character's awareness, we enhance the sense of impending tragedy so essential to the final scene.

In other words Hamlet can now see that, in a very special sense, he truly was mad, not simply feigning it. This is because true responsibility can only exist in satori; prior to that attainment man operates from delusion, social conditioning, unconscious, instinctive behaviour, and so on. He must go "mad" in a way that allows him insights into the "madness" of the world around him. Then, once he achieves enlightenment he becomes fully responsible, capable of making choices without illusion, and thus the inevitability of the tragic condition is underlined:

"...thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter." (V.ii)

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If it be now, 'tis not to come;
if it be not to come, it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.
(V.ii.)

However, can this view of Hamlet's development be supported by the rest of the play? When a Zen Master wishes to illuminate his student about some element of Zen it is usually accomplished either by example or an illustrative tale that illuminates the particular hurdle the student is struggling with. While such tales are generally very simple, there is no reason one cannot look at the story of Hamlet as if it were such a tale (albeit a far more complex one), one that illustrates many of the common elements a Zen pupil might encounter. Such elements include: a longing to be done with 'life'; a struggle with reason and emotion; the concept of no-mind; use of koans; a loss of self (ego); a renunciation of attachments to worldly concerns; and finally, acceptance of things as they are.

We have ample enough examples of the developmental stages (and inevitable pitfalls) a Zen pupil goes through to prepare himself for a transcendent experience. The task is to find these elements in the play and then examine Hamlet's development toward the final moment in light of them.

The path traditionally begins with a recognition by the pupil (the one who is to prepare for satori) that he is living in pain and uncertainty, and longing for something he cannot truly define. Typically normal, mundane views of reality and truth no longer satisfy him. He wants answers to his most profound questions. Answers that are not dogmatic. And this very desire to find a deeper truth sets him apart from others and automatically leads him to the path or master. Should he come to a master without such desire he will either be turned away or challenged to find it, As Thein-An writes in **An Approach to Zen**: "Most people would rather go to church to pray to some supreme being for salvation than work out their salvation by themselves. But Zen ... demands that its followers think. We ask: What am I? What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life? What is my true self?"

When we first see Hamlet he is suffering. Pain over the loss of his father, disgust with his mother's too quick marriage to his uncle and frustrated anger with his society's superficial, indeed hypocritical, demonstrations of concern and understanding permeate his behaviour and language.

But I have that within which passes show;

These but the trapping and suits of woe. (I.ii)

"O God, God,

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely." (I.ii)

It is not, nor it cannot come to good. (I.ii)

Along with the pain, and dissatisfaction with everyday life, it is also understood that there must be a genuine willingness to be done with all attachments to worldly things. Again to quote Thein-an: "Our world is a world of desire. We are born from the desire between our father and mother. Then when we emerge into this world, we become infatuated with many things, and become ourselves well-springs of desire. For every desire there is an attachment, namely, to the object of desire. "

And until this attachment to desires is dropped the special event cannot happen. As Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki put it: "One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I had thought and stayed in quietude. ... and Ztt! I entered. "

The willingness to do this is generally recognized to result from either a surfeit of experiences, one has "seen it all", or from a deepened sensitivity to the gross and deadening nature of abused power and unrestricted pleasure arising from a shock that has caused one to reexamine basic assumptions. These conditions are certainly true for Hamlet:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew... (I.ii)

Hamlet easily fulfils the first requirement of a Zen acolyte.

Now we come to a very critical element of Zen - the use of the intellect to "focus" upon a specific question, statement or task. This usually involves the assignment of a Koan to the pupil. A Koan originally referred to a public document that set up a standard of law or judgment. As it has come down to us through zen practice it is a generally a statement (or question or answer) made by a master that the student is supposed to hold in his mind at all times. It is often used as a focus in mediation. Obviously, Hamlet has no "master", at least not in the traditional sense and is never asked to "meditate". And yet there are some intriguing similarities between Hamlet's experience with the Ghost in Act One and the experience of a zen pupil who has been given a Koan. While the obvious task that the Ghost sets Hamlet is to revenge his murder, there is another less obvious but no less important statement made by the ghost:

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me. (I,v)

The repetition of words, and the fact that this is the Ghost's final statement to Hamlet, gives it emphasis. It also suggests that while revenge is important, it is also important to bring the truth to light. In other words Hamlet is being asked to 'remember' the truth. Later, in Act 3 Scene 4, in the only reappearance of the Ghost he begins with the line, "Do not forget." Furthermore, in virtually every one of Hamlet's scenes the concept of remembering is prominently expressed.

And what is Hamlet's response to the Ghost's request?

Remember thee? Ay, thou poor distracted ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember Thee? Yea, from the table of my memory I'll wipe away all
trivial fond records, All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there, And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain ... It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me. I have sworn't." (I.v)

Not only does Hamlet say that this statement will be his only focus, he also expresses the intent to practice another element of satori which is the state of "no-mind", a condition in which all of one's learning, knowledge, past experience is "dropped" so that one exists only in the moment. In the **Guide to Zen Practice**, by S. Ogata there are two strikingly relevant passages that describe this: "He who wishes to study prajna must first rouse great compassion in himself, and take the great vow... That is to say, he is to give up all contracts, stop everything, bring body and mind into oneness..." and "If you want ... to be the free master of yourself ... stop your hankering monkey-like mind from doing mischief, keep it quietly under control..."

In fact the use of a Koan has two clear purposes in Zen; one is to arrive at "no-mind" and the other is to learn to respond to life immediately and with perfect appropriateness. By practicing a Koan, one is challenged to constantly consider one's own actions and thoughts in light of its often paradoxical message. Certainly, everything Hamlet does from this moment in the play, can be seen as a struggle to fulfill his dreadful promise without compromising his integrity. This leads him to constantly question either the task or his own response to it.

At this point it should occur to the serious student of the play that Hamlet's entire journey can be seen as a successful attempt to achieve the conditions he sets himself in this early speech. From this perspective he hesitates to complete the task of revenging his father's murder, not because he is a "man of thought" or lacking in the will to act, but because he is not ready. He has not achieved the proper state of being (satori) that is his true goal. Hamlet must not merely revenge his father, he must do it in an uncompromising and appropriate way, one that fulfills his promise to remember. Having come this far the other elements of Zen appear increasingly relevant to Hamlet's struggles. D.T. Suzuki states, in **Zen Buddhism**: "The first object is to escape the bondage in which all finite beings find themselves, but if we do not cut asunder the very chain of ignorance with which we are bound hands and feet, where shall we look for deliverance? And this chain of ignorance is wrought of nothing else but the intellect and sensuous infatuation..."

Much has been written about Hamlet's struggle with rationality and intellectual conceits. We have such statements as:

...for there is nothing
either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

To me it is a prison. (II.ii.)

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought... (III.I.)

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event... (IV.iv.)

This last speech is particularly interesting in that Hamlet appears to be struggling to find choice in the difference between "godlike reason", bestial oblivion" and "thinking too precisely". What is the answer? Obviously "bestial oblivion" isn't acceptable, one does not wish to simply "gaze out" without self awareness. Yet to be caught in a relative world of weighing the precise balance of right and wrong in each action would seem to give free reign to such affects as cowardice or ineffective action. How can one arrive at one's "godlike reason" and, what exactly is it? The answer lies at the heart of Hamlet's real task, and his "Koan" - to remember.

In *Toehold On Zen* Jeffrey Swan writes: "The existence of knowledge presupposes the knower and the known; therefore there is a duality. How can we come into relationship with the real or the actual? It is obvious that it cannot be done through knowledge, because knowledge is the dividing factor, creative relativity. It is the repository of information-about-things and not about things themselves. " In other words, the problem Hamlet is facing may be that he has forgotten what he originally swore to do - "wipe out all saws of books... etc." "Godlike reason" would mean doing what has to be done, without worrying, thinking, planning, etc. In other words behaving in a manner that is fully appropriate to the circumstances.

Let us again turn to Herrigle: "... (the Zen pupil) behaves like a man who is trying to remember something." That Hamlet cannot do this at first is an indication that his is not in harmony with reality, truth, the actual. He is not in a state of satori. And it is his thinking that is the problem. He has not "learned" the right use of intellect. In fact his intellect is muddied with all sorts of habits, but most particularly with the habits of rationality and emotionality. In other words he is infatuated with planning, comparing, questioning, and with suffering. Ogata says, in *Guide To Zen Practice*: If you want ... to be the free master of yourself ... stop your hankering monkey-like mind from doing mischief, keep it quietly under control...

The best example (among many) of the futility of Hamlet's rationality-habit is in Act III Scene iii when he comes upon his Uncle who appears to be praying. That Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius at this moment is a great irony; for Claudius, by his own admission, cannot pray. This is as fine an example of the problem of Hamlet's "sicklied thought" as we will find.

But what of the emotional aspect of this problem? From the very first of Hamlet's soliloquies we are presented with the portrait of suffering that, while psychically real, is exaggerated. No less than five times in his first soliloquy Hamlet uses the emotional exclamation "O". For thirty lines he bemoans the loss of his father and his mother's marriage, then finishes with the ironic line, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue". Although the content of this speech provides some exposition and shows us the despair that Hamlet rightly feels, its effect is unquestionable a portrait of someone who is overly dramatic. And this portrait is repeated again and again, in almost every soliloquy in the play. This is a typical condition for a Zen pupil. As Herrigle says: "For hours, days, and weeks the pupil ... thinks the problem through in all possible directions. All in vain, the solution will not come. He doubts his own abilities, begins to despair, and does not know where to turn."

Hamlet, himself, is aware of it at times:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab... (II.ii)

An interesting sidelight of Hamlet's self-awareness can be seen in his advice to the players, which follows immediately the above soliloquy. The main thrust his advice is to "acquire and beget a temperance" to "o'erstep not the modesty of nature" to "hold the mirror up to nature". This would suggest that he is already Buddha (able to expresse his "godlike reason) but he isn't living it. If he were he would exhibit more modest emotional responses, as Herrigle says: "(The Zen Master has) an aversion to the

dishonest of exaggerating. (He) is aware of the danger inherent in the expression of feeling: of saying more than you feel..." and "This freedom does not mean being untouched by joy and suffering, love and hate, but feeling both of them intensely and yet remaining independent, not losing yourself in them, not being consumed by them." The two aspects of Hamlet's problem are connected. His too precise thoughts are colored by his over-emotional expressions of suffering, and both his thoughts and his feelings distract him from the tasks at hand. He is caught in paradox, another prominent aspect of Zen teaching. He knows what he must do but knowing blocks doing. He has promised to revenge his father's murder (morally correct in his world). He has set himself (unprepared) against the evil and untruths of his Uncle's reign, without fully realizing that in doing so he has got himself into a real fix. His real task is to become enlightened, although he is not aware of that. What can he do?
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There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will. (V.II.)

In Zen the answer is "nothing". Satori is something that happens not something that is achieved or created. The pupil can only prepare: focus on his Koan, try to remember his path, work at being unattached and wait alertly. In doing so several things may happen to him. He may experience temporary "madness" (which is later seen as a reversal of his worldly perceptions), profound despair, inability to act, failure of spirit and will, and intense questioning about the meaning of life. He may attempt to think his way to satori, to feel his way, to pray, meditate, even "act" his way to it. Nothing works. Even his Koan that has brought him "so far along the path" has really brought him "nowhere". According to the **Guide To Zen Practice**: "He must be like a man who has swallowed a pill of hot iron. Unable to spit it out, he must melt (with it) all of his former wrong views and perceptions by working at it ... until he experiences the identity of subject and object. Then like a dumb person in a dream he will admit to himself that he has experienced enlightenment. When this happens ... He can kill Buddhas and the Fathers when he meets them, is gloriously free at the moment of his death..."

Still we have not shown, unequivocally, that Hamlet reaches a state of satori in Act V. In order to do so we must show how and when it happened, as well as offer uncompromising evidence of its existence. Let's look at what happens just prior to Act V Scene II?

First we have the graveyard scene. There are several indications in this scene that a metamorphosis of some sort is taking place. First there is a change in Hamlet's attitude towards his father. If we can draw a parallel between Hamlet's Father, "King, father, royal Dane" and "Imperious Caesar" we can see a remarkable reduction in the awe in which Hamlet holds his father:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away. (V.i.)

In fact, the very idea of death, and what might happen afterward, seems to be undergoing a radical turn. No longer is Hamlet concerned with what "may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil". Instead we have "the thing itself", a moldy skull; "alas, poor Yorick".

Next Hamlet is confronted with the dead Ophelia and with Laertes' condemnations. These evoke in him a momentary return to his over-emotional expression as he jumps into the grave. Yet this outburst is brief, public and clearly strikes a false note to both the audience and Hamlet, "Nay, an thou'lt mouth, I'll rant as well as thou." In fact his final line of this scene is a recognition that however he feels, things will work out according to some objective balance inherent in life:

I loved you ever. But it is no matter. Let Hercules himself do what he may, The cat will mew, and dog will have his day. (V.i.)

In the beginning of Act V Scene ii, we have Hamlet's relating of the events that occurred while he was at sea. This begins with a statement of his recognition that he is both the doer and the one who serves.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will. (V.ii.)

Then he recounts the action he took regarding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In this recounting we (and Horatio) are struck by his lack of emotional tone, of guilt for his actions. He did not "think" about it, just did it:

Or I could make a prologue to my brains, They had begun the play. I sat me down,
Devised a new commission, wrote it fair. (V.ii.)

Finally, he states that nothing has changed. He is still required to kill Claudius and avenge his father. The difference is that he no longer has any qualms about it. No longer does he bemoan that "...time is out of joint, "O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right".

Finally, we have the entrance of Osric, the courtier. And in this encounter Hamlet is faced with one of the most superficial characters in the play, with a personality not unlike that of Rosencrantz or Guildenstern. Hamlet makes fun of Osric just as he did of his two "friends" but without rancor or anger. He is no longer offended by the attempt to "play him like a pipe". He sees Osric as he is, but laughs rather than condemns.

By now it is evident that the transformation has occurred, but where? Why no obvious moment of revelation, no dramatic event or cathartic speech? If Shakespeare had intended to clearly reveal his character's development, if it was truly his intention to illustrate a process not unlike the attainment of satori, why no dramatic moment of enlightenment? Lets see what Herrigle has to say, "Characteristically, satori does not induce any striking buoyancy of being, a sense of excitement or a general feeling of elation... for the enlightened one is serene and not in any way conspicuous. "

In fact, one of the predominate aspects of satori is its ordinariness, both in effect and in occurrence. According to Suzuki, "Not only is satori itself a prosaic and non-glorious event, but the occasion that inspires it also seems to be unromantic and altogether lacking in supersensuality. Someone takes hold of you, or slaps you, or brings you a cup of tea, or makes some most commonplace remark, or recites some passage from a sutra or from a book of poetry, and when your mind is ripe for its outburst, you come at once to Satori."

The moment simply passes the audience by, in fact it may not have been a single "moment". Only Hamlet is aware of what has happened and he cannot express it directly. The best he can do is quietly share his certainty with Horatio:

If it be now, 'tis not to

come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not

now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no

man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to

leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.)

In the state of satori he will manifest it in his actions, and being. And the way he behaves throughout the rest of the play is clearly indicative of satori . His actions all now have the qualities of acceptance and immediacy. He will not condemn, merely allow himself to be the instrument of judgement. He accepts whatever might happen, even the possibility of his own death. Herrigle's comments regarding this state are particularly apt here: "Everything that happens, and above all what happens to me, should be observed impartially, as though on the deepest level it did not concern me." and "He has no complexes, can live from day to day and find complete fulfillment in each, quietly leaving the future in the darkness of fate. ... Personal immortality has ceased to be a problem for him." and "His cooperation (with what is required of him) consist only in his readiness and receptivity."

Even the manner in which he kills Claudius and Laertes are in harmony with a such a description of satori.

The point envenomed too? Then venom to thy work. (V.ii.)

Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee. (V.ii.)

"His cooperation (with what is required of him) consists only in his readiness and receptivity." as Herrigel so aptly states. And Shakespeare gives us clear verbal cues as to Hamlet's inner world. Not through the use of soliloquy, for no longer is his inner world characterized by intellectual and emotional struggle, but by simple statements of how he feels,

The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit. (V.ii)

and what must be done to fulfill his final obligation to others,

But I do prophesy th' election lights On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. (V.ii.)

Finally, in Hamlet's last line "The rest is silence" we have a perfect expression of satori, mirrored in **Zen in the Art of Archery**: "The result, in the end, is perfect stillness..."

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