

THE CENTER FOR SELF DEVELOPMENT

Present to you

Introduction to Concentration

"The powers of the mind are like the rays of the sun. When they are concentrated, they illumine."

~ Swami Vivekananda ~

This section is of extreme importance. Concentration is an exercise for the mind, but it offers *so much more*. We strongly suggest giving this section your fullest attention and working diligently to develop your ability to Concentrate. The dividends it will return will amaze you and affect every aspect of your Life.

Concentration is the ability to fix your attention for a period of time on one single thought, Action, or goal of *choice* to the exclusion of everything else. When you Concentrate, you conserve your thought power by not dissipating it on irrelevant thoughts or distractions. You are able to gather and harness all of your thought power and focus it to accomplish what you set out to do.

Most people possess only a very small degree of Concentration ability. They allow distractions to scatter their Awareness, and they consequently divert their time and energy to less important, useless, or even harmful activities. Some people's minds jump continually and randomly from subject to subject. Others can Concentrate and focus their minds but not on what they want; their minds become attracted to thoughts and ideas that haunt or tempt them, and this creates fear, worry, or unwelcome desires.

Distractions actually rule the lives of most people. They become so Conditioned by distractions that they accept them as normal; they don't Realize how little control they have over their thoughts or how much the distractions are affecting their lives. The following example will demonstrate how distractions can direct and rule your Life:

You are at home and need to read or study something for your job or school. You make yourself comfortable on your favorite chair, and with reading materials in hand, you start to read.

As you are reading, you hear a telephone conversation in another room of

the house, and you Shift your attention to what is being said for a moment before you bring your attention back to your reading. You end up rereading the previous paragraph to reestablish where you were, and then you continue reading.

As you are reading, you become slightly bored and feel a bit hungry, and so you decide to get a snack. When you return, you find your place again, try to remember what you have read, and then resume your reading.

As you are reading, something reminds you of an e-mail you have been waiting for, and so you take another Break to check your e-mails. You get sidetracked, Respond to several e-mails, and also end up checking out something else online. Your mind then jumps back to you're reading, so you go back to your favorite chair, scan over what you have previously read to refresh your memory, and start to read once more.

After a while you feel restless and switch on the radio for some soft background music to drown out some background noises that are starting to distract you. You hear a song that reminds you of the fun you had the last time the song played, and so you daydream for a minute or two. You then get back to you're reading, only to become distracted by a commercial on the radio. You find that the radio isn't helping, so you turn it off. After you again settle down, you reread the previous paragraph and then continue to read.

Soon your cell phone receives a text message, and you take a quick Break to see who it is. You end up reading and Responding to the text message, and for the next ten minutes you are interrupted every few minutes to read and Respond to the continuing texts until you finally inform your correspondent that you have to focus on your reading.

You continue to read for a little while but then remember something you forgot to do. You panic and look up at the clock to see the time. You Realize that you have been trying to read for the past hour and have barely read a chapter, and you can hardly recall what you have read.

If the above scenario sounds familiar, you may be plagued by distractions, as are most people who have not developed their ability to Concentrate. Now imagine being so engrossed in what you are reading to the point of filtering out everything else. Imagine that you are not distracted by and actually ignore background noises, food, e-mails, text messages, stray thoughts, and interruptions. Imagine that your attention is so focused that

you become fully engaged in what you are reading, comprehend it all, and finish your reading in 15 minutes. Now, with the time you didn't waste, you can give your full attention to anything else you want. In this scenario, you become more effective at whatever you do and spend less time doing it. You may have experienced moments like this when you were really interested in or passionate about what you were doing. You may have been so engrossed in something that you ended up skipping a meal, staying up late, or totally forgetting to do something else. You may Believe that you can summon this level of focus and Concentration if you really want to, but it is often more difficult to do than you may think. Try the following simple experiment to become more Aware of your ability to Concentrate:

a) Set a timer for two minutes. Close your eyes, and imagine a white circle.

b) For the next two minutes focus your Concentration on the white circle only, and do not allow any other thoughts to enter your mind. Do not have an internal dialog with yourself about the circle; just remain focused and Aware, and Concentrate on the circle.

c) Keep track of how many times your mind is interrupted or strays from the white circle. You can do this by holding a pen or pencil in your hand and making a tick mark on a sheet of paper for every distraction you experience. If any other thoughts enter your mind or if you become distracted by anything else, count it as an interruption. If at any time during the two minutes you reflect upon how you are doing with the exercise, also count it as an interruption.

If you are like the average person, you probably had several--if not numerous--interruptions. Now consider this: If you had several distractions in two minutes using your full Concentration, imagine how many times you get distracted in an hour of normal activity. Countless thoughts, desires, and sense impressions pass through your mind every minute, and they all interrupt your attention, pull your Awareness in all different directions, and make it very difficult for you to stay focused. An untrained mind tends to drift and jump from subject to subject, and a task that requires just a few minutes to accomplish with Concentration will take much longer to accomplish without it.

Imagine developing the ability to focus your mind at will whenever you choose. Think about how much more effective everything you do will become. A trained mind can *choose* to exclude or embrace any thought, idea, word, image, sense or sensation, or even emotion. When your mind is

focused, your energies will not be dissipated on irrelevant thoughts or activities that pull you away from your goals and living the Life you choose. That is why developing Concentration is essential to anyone who aspires to take charge and control of their Life.

Following is just a few of the many benefits that you will experience when you develop good Concentration:

- ***You will be able to reject unwanted, futile, and debilitating thoughts.***
- ***You will be able to choose and direct your thoughts as you see fit.***
- ***You will be able to think with more clarity and thus verbally express yourself without
extraneous words or ideas.***
- ***You will be able to more keenly focus your mind on what you are doing and follow it
through to completion.***
- ***You will be able to pay attention to details and avoid mistakes.***
- ***You will be able to better comprehend information and thus learn more quickly.***
- ***You will be able to think more clearly and thus strengthen your decisiveness and
willpower.***
- ***You will be able to quiet and Rest your mind and thus create a greater sense of inner
peace.***

So how do you develop or improve your ability to Concentrate? Reading, studying, and paying attention to what you are doing all develop your ability to Concentrate to a certain degree as a by- product of that particular activity. But performing Concentration exercises specifically targets and strengthens your ability to Concentrate, and to a significantly higher degree. Concentration exercises are like weight training for your mind. The exercises are relatively easy and fun to perform, and they provide valuable, quantifiable feedback with which to measure your improvement.

The Concentration exercises we will present consist of focusing your mind upon a given subject or object and then holding your attention on that subject or object for a certain length time while not allowing your thoughts to deviate or become distracted from it. Following is suggested guidelines for performing the Concentration exercises:

- *Practice the Concentration exercises when you are fresh and alert. If you feel sleepy or exhausted, take a nap first or practice at another time; otherwise, you will be practicing and Conditioning daydreaming or falling asleep and not Concentration.*
- *Start with the first exercise on the list.*
- *Set a timer (select a timer with a soft, gentle alarm) for 1 minute, and follow the instructions for that exercise. Keep note of the number of interruptions you experience during the exercise by using a piece of string with knots tied at one-half inch intervals, and pass one knot for each interruption (or you could just as easily use a string of beads). After you complete the exercise, keep a record of your results by recording on a piece of paper or in a notepad the total number of interruptions you experienced during that minute.*
- *Continue to repeat the same exercise in 1-minute intervals, and keep track of and record the total number of interruptions that you experience for each attempt.*

- *Practice the same exercise for about 10 to 15 minutes every day for 1 week.*
- *At the end of 1 week, replace the exercise you are currently practicing with the next exercise on the list.*
- *You will only be practicing 1 exercise per day, per week. Continue in the same fashion until you go through all 12 exercises in order (this will take 12 weeks).*
- *When you complete the entire list, cycle through the list again. For this second cycle, increase the time to 2 minutes for any exercise that you were able to perform for 1 full minute without any interruptions. Keep the same time (1 minute) for any exercise that you were unable to perform for 1 full minute without interruptions.*
- *Continue in the same fashion (12-week cycles), and increase the time by 1 minute per cycle for the exercises that you are able to perform without interruptions. Try to build up to at least 5 minutes for all of the exercises.*

At first you may think that performing each exercise uninterrupted for 5 minutes is impossible, but we assure you it is not. Keep your overall practice time the same; or, if you prefer, increase it slightly as you progress. You will find some exercises easier than others, as each exercise emphasizes a different aspect of Concentration.

Some exercises are more visual, some more auditory, others more abstract. Cycling through the list will allow you to develop a well- rounded ability to Concentrate while avoiding boredom with the exercises.

Take it easy, and progress slowly until you become acclimated to all of the exercises. Getting carried away and overtraining can cause mental Distress. **True Concentration is not a tense, draining activity. You should remain calm and Relaxed, yet Aware and focused.** It does not matter if your Concentration is weak at first. Don't give up. Your ability to Concentrate will only develop and strengthen with practice. In time you will find that you can Concentrate on anything, at anytime, and

anywhere. You will be able to focus your mind and think and function under the most trying circumstances, all the while remaining calm and Relaxed.

Concentration Exercises

Find a place where you can be alone and undisturbed when performing these exercises. If you set up a Personal Sanctuary as we suggested in Chapter Six (see *Nourishing the Physical State of Consciousness*), this would be an ideal place to practice.

If you are experiencing any Distress, resolve it before practicing, or practice at another time when you are more calm and Relaxed.

When you are ready, sit with your spine erect, and settle into a comfortable position.

Exercise 1. Select any small, simple object, such as an apple; and set it on a table in front of you. Set your timer, and Concentrate on anything related to the apple. For instance, look at its shape, texture, and color. Focus on its stem, or look for any imperfections. Notice its position on the table, the light hitting it. See if you can sense its smell. Think about how an apple feels in your mouth, how it tastes. Focus on anything as long as it relates to the apple in front of you. If you find your thoughts wandering away from the apple, note the interruption, and then gently bring your attention back to the apple. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over. This exercise confines your mind within set boundaries, but it also allows your mind some room to examine and explore.

Exercise 2. Choose an inspiring phrase consisting of a few words. Write it down neatly on a sheet of paper in front of you. Slowly repeat the phrase either silently to yourself or aloud several times. Then set your timer, and allow your thoughts to explore the meaning of each word separately or the entire phrase as a whole. If your thoughts deviate from the phrase, note the interruption, gently refocus on the phrase, and continue to explore its meaning. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over. This exercise also allows your mind room to explore, but it focuses your mind more on meaning and interpretations than on physical attributes. If you are having difficulty finding or selecting a phrase, try picking out a short phrase, sentence, or quote that you find interesting from a section of this Manual.

Exercise 3. This exercise is a visual moving exercise, meaning that your object of Concentration changes or moves throughout the exercise. Select a

book (preferably without any pictures or charts, just words), set your timer, and silently count to yourself the number of punctuation marks as you scan along each line. Perform the counting mentally, using only your eyes to scan; don't follow along with your finger. Don't rush; proceed at a slow and steady pace. Every time you lose your count, note the interruption, and then restart your count beginning with one (you don't have to go back to the beginning of the page where you started the exercise; you can restart your count wherever you are on the page and just keep proceeding forward). When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 4. This exercise is a non-visual moving exercise.

Set your timer, and begin performing the **Diaphragmatic Breathing exercise**

1. Lie on your back on a flat surface, such as the floor or your bed. Bend your knees up, place your feet flat on the floor or bed, and support your head with a pillow. Place one hand on your chest and the other hand on the center of your stomach, directly above your navel. This will help you to feel whether you are breathing correctly.
2. Relax, and inhale slowly and deeply through your nose until your stomach moves out against your hand (your hand will rise upward). The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible. The entire inhalation should last 5 to 10 seconds or more. Continue to inhale slowly until your lungs are comfortably full. Pause your breath very briefly, and then continue on to the next step.
3. Let your stomach fall inward as you exhale slowly and smoothly through your nose (your hand will move downward). The hand on your chest should continue to remain as still as possible. Continue to exhale until your lungs are comfortably empty; you may feel your stomach muscles tense slightly. The entire exhalation should last 5 to 10 seconds or more. This completes 1 full round. Pause your breath very briefly, and then continue on to the next step.
4. Continue alternating between steps 2 and 3, and complete 10 to 20 rounds.

The point of this exercise is to work and train your diaphragm, not your abdominal muscles. As you perform the exercise, focus on the smooth and

gentle contraction and relaxation of your diaphragm while you breathe, and keep your abdominal muscles as relaxed as possible. Your inhalations and exhalations should feel smooth, relaxed, and effortless. When you first learn Diaphragmatic Breathing, it is best that you follow the instructions to lie on your back with your hands on your chest and stomach to ensure that you take full, deep breaths that reach down into your abdomen instead of shallow, partial breaths that reach only into your upper chest.

Once you become familiar with the exercise, it can be performed without using your hands or while you are sitting, standing, or even walking. Eventually you will be able to perform this exercise wherever and whenever the moment and time allow.

Close your eyes, and count each exhalation. Concentrate only on your breathing; follow your breath in and out, and advance your count at the end of each exhalation. If you lose your count, note the interruption, and restart your count beginning with one. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 5. Choose an inspiring word or just a simple elongated sound, such as "ummm" or "ahhh." (You can keep your eyes open or closed during this exercise.) Set your timer, and repeat the word or sound either softly aloud or silently to yourself. The word or sound should follow your breathing--inhale, and when your lungs are comfortably full, exhale softly as you reverberate the word or sound orally or mentally, almost as if you are humming it during your exhalation. Your thoughts should remain only on the word or sound that you are repeating. If your Awareness deviates from the exercise or if any other thoughts or words enter your mind, record the interruption, and then gently refocus on your word or sound. When the timer sounds, note the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 6. For this exercise you will first need to draw a 3-or 4-inch geometrical shape or figure on a sheet of paper or poster board. Then set your timer, and focus your Awareness solely on the shape you have drawn. If any other thoughts or distractions enter your mind, note the interruption, gently refocus your Awareness on the shape, and resume the exercise. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 7. For this exercise it is helpful to have a plain blank wall in front of you. You can tape a blank poster board on the wall in front of you if the wall you are using has a distracting pattern or texture. Sit approximately 3 to 4 feet away from the wall. Keep your eyes open throughout this exercise, blinking as necessary. Set your timer, and imagine the outline of a simple 4-inch circle on the wall in front of you. (Note that in this exercise you are *imagining* the outline of a circle in your mind's eye, whereas in Exercise 6 you were focusing on the *actual* shape that you drew.) Focus your Awareness solely on the imagined outline of the circle. If any other thoughts or distractions enter your mind, note the interruption, and then gently refocus on the imagined outline of the circle. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 8. For this exercise you will first need to draw a small geometrical figure on a sheet of paper or poster board. Select any simple shape--such as a circle, oval, triangle, square, or crescent--and draw a 3-inch version of it in the center of the paper or poster board. Color the image any color you choose. (It is preferable to also color the background with the complementary color. The complementary color pairs are: red/green, blue/orange, yellow/violet, white/black. Therefore, if you color an orange circle in the center of your paper/poster board, you would then color the background blue. When placed next to each other, complementary colors create the strongest contrast.) After you have completed coloring your shape (and background), stare at the shape in the center of your picture; do not let your eyes deviate from the center shape, and try not to blink too often.

After a minute or so, quickly set your timer, and close your eyes. You should now see in your mind's eye an afterimage of the shape you drew, but the shape will appear in its complementary color (you will also see an afterimage of the background in its complementary color). For instance, if you originally drew an orange circle, you should now see a blue circle when you close your eyes (as well as an orange background). Continue to Concentrate on this afterimage and nothing else.

As the image fades, just pretend it is still there; try to recall it, and focus solely on the afterimage or your imagined image of it. Remain Aware of only the image. If any other thoughts or distractions enter your mind, note the interruption, and then gently refocus on the afterimage, and resume the exercise. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

For this exercise you can reopen your eyes for a few seconds to help reestablish the image if you are having trouble holding the image in your mind's eye. As you become more proficient at using your inner eye, this will become unnecessary. If you are not getting a strong afterimage, you may have to increase the lighting in your room to stimulate the effect more sharply. This exercise also is excellent for enhancing your Envisioning ability.

Exercise 9. Set your timer, and close your eyes. Scan your inner vision (i.e., what you visually sense or "see" when your eyes are closed), and notice any sense of light. This light will seem to move and morph into different shapes. This light is your *inner light*. If you do not sense any light, just imagine a sphere or circle of light for now; in time you will become more Aware of it. Focus your attention on this inner light. Try to condense this light into the center of your vision, and try to bring its color to as white and bright as possible. Your attention should be solely on the light without any mental thoughts; just observe the inner light. If any other thoughts or distractions enter your mind, record the interruption, and then gently refocus on your inner light. When the timer sounds, note the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 10. For this exercise it is most helpful to have a very quiet place to practice. You can use ear muffs or ear plugs (the type used for hearing protection) if there are too many distracting sounds in or near your practice area. Set your timer, close your eyes, and just listen. You should be able to hear a very subtle, high-pitch sound. This sound is your *inner sound*. Keep your attention solely on this sound, and focus on the highest pitch you hear. If any other thoughts or distractions enter your mind, note the interruption, and then gently refocus on your inner sound. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 11. This exercise combines the inner light and inner sound exercises (Exercises 9 and 10) into one exercise. Set your timer, close your eyes, and focus your attention on your inner light while you simultaneously focus on your inner sound. Keep in mind that you can only focus your attention on one thing at a time. So for this exercise, do not split your attention and vacillate between the two, but try to meld them together. Make the light and the sound into one. Focus your attention solely on this light/sound. If any thoughts or distractions enter your mind, note the interruption, and then gently refocus on your inner light/sound. When the timer sounds,

record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

Exercise 12. Stillness practice. Your goal for this exercise is to transcend your mind and reach beyond your thoughts to a place of *inner silence*. The previous exercises, if seriously practiced, will have prepared you to Still your thoughts and remain in a state of silence, or non- thought. Set your timer, close your eyes, and begin either the inner light exercise (Exercise 9) or the inner sound exercise (Exercise 10). Select whichever exercise is easier for you to maintain your focus without interruptions. Focus on the light or sound for a few seconds, and then drop it from your Awareness. Simply stop Concentrating on the light or sound, but keep your Awareness fixed and alert.

As the light or sound drops away and your focus remains undistracted, your Awareness will dwell in silence. Dwell in this silent state to the best of your ability. If any stray thoughts or distractions arise, note the interruption, and then just release them and let them fade away. Bring your attention back to your inner light or sound. Once you are restabilized on your inner light or sound, merely drop it away again, and try to reenter the state of non- thought. Again, if any stray thoughts or distractions arise when you are in the state of non-thought, note the interruption, and then gently refocus on the inner silence.

Trying too hard actually makes this exercise more difficult. If you are told not to think of a pink elephant, chances are you will. Do not focus on *not* thinking, or you will actually generate more thought. Instead Relax, focus gently on your inner light or sound, and then drop it away, and just be alert to the inner silence of non-thought. Non-thought is the space *between* thoughts. When the timer sounds, record the total number of interruptions, reset the timer, and try again until your practice period is over.

As you become more proficient with this exercise, you will become less and less distracted, and you will be able to hold this non-thought state of inner silence or Stillness for longer and longer periods. This is a very powerful exercise, and it will prepare you for more advanced forms of meditation, which we will introduce in the following chapter.

The secret to success with Concentration is *regular* practice. Practicing for 10 minutes every day is superior to practicing for 70 minutes once a week. Keep track of your interruptions and best times for each practice session,

and date and save your records. Referring to your records over time will allow you to see your progress.

As your Concentration improves, you may begin to enjoy and look forward to the exercises. You will discover more about the operation and functioning of your mind as part of your overall Consciousness. Over time you will Condition your mind and develop the Habit of Concentration. Eventually you will find that you will be able to Concentrate your attention effortlessly upon anything you choose.

Remember, your mind can only think of one thing at a time. Whatever you Concentrate on becomes the focus of your Awareness and attention and is what you will most likely bring about in your Life. Concentration exercises give you the ability to remain focused on what you truly desire in Life and to sidestep that which you want to avoid.

For instance, if you focus on an Expectation, your mind will project into the future, and you will likely experience all of the Distress that Expectations bring. Conversely, if you focus on a Plan and remain Aware of every changing opportunity and lesson, your mind will remain in the present and on working toward, learning about, and achieving what you want to accomplish. The different Outcomes in these two scenarios are the result of how you focus and Concentrate your mind.

You get what you focus on.

Earlier we said that your mind is very powerful but that it can easily be hijacked by the other States of Consciousness. Learning how to harness the workings and power of your mind will allow you to regain control of this potent source of Awareness and attention and guide your Consciousness in the direction you choose.

Additional Mental Exercises

Below are some additional mental exercises that you may want to explore to develop and further Refine your Mental State of Consciousness:

Nonjudgmental Exercise. Think of a subject about which you have a very strong opinion. Now try to experience it from the absolute opposite viewpoint. Remember, there is no right or wrong opinion, only differing viewpoints based on differing Beliefs. Remain open, and truly try to Understand and accept the other viewpoint as valid, based upon the Beliefs that support it. Try to discern the differences between the two viewpoints rather than judging them. **Discerning is noticing a difference; judging is**

rating that difference.

This exercise is not meant to change your viewpoint or Belief. It is designed to open your mind to the fact that there is more than one way of seeing things and that other viewpoints and Beliefs are valid in their own context. Judgment closes that door of Realization and dismisses the other perspective as wrong. As Aristotle once stated, "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."

By honestly exploring the opposite viewpoint, you can cultivate a more open mind and develop a more objective vantage point. This will allow you to see things for what they are without bias and judgment. It can also make you a more compassionate and tolerant human being.

Exploring Opportunities. Create a challenging or difficult Event in your mind, and think of several different Responses you might make if that situation actually occurred in your Life. Envision each Response in your mind, and imagine the Outcome. Keep it realistic and within your capabilities. Keep trying the different Responses until you come up with what you think would be your best Response. In Life you don't often get "do-overs." But in your mind you can explore and try out different options to help you determine which one might give you the best possible results. Using your imagination is a powerful way to explore your options and prepare for challenges or obstacles that you may encounter.

Review. Reflect back on a past Event that you found difficult or challenging, and explore how you experienced it from all Four States of Consciousness. Do you think you learned anything from that Event? How would you handle the same Event if it occurred later today? Reviewing your past can help you frame your future. Since past experiences feed your Belief System with information upon which you then base future decisions, reviewing past experiences is a very powerful way to become Aware of and intentionally incorporate lessons learned into your Belief System.

This exercise trains your mind to seek out and discover lessons that may otherwise go unnoticed and therefore result in a weak point in your Understanding. The review can be on an Event that occurred years ago or on what happened this morning. The more recent the Event, the more information you will be able to recall, and the more relevant the lesson may be.

Many people have found that an evening review of the main happenings or

Events of the day is a powerful way to extract more out of their experiences as well as a good way to end their day.

Try New Things. Everything you do stimulates a portion of your brain. Trying new things--especially things that are completely new to you-- activates different areas of your brain. If you have never played a musical instrument, try taking a few lessons. If you are not physically inclined, try taking an exercise or Yoga class. Try new foods. Drive a new way to work. Try using your opposite hand to eat, wash, and brush your teeth. If you always say no try saying yes. The more it deviates from your regular routine, the better. Getting out of your old routine and Habits not only keeps your mind sharp, but also it makes Life more interesting and fun.

Memory Exercises. Look at any picture with which you are unfamiliar for 1 minute. Now turn the picture over, and on a separate sheet of paper, list as many details as you can recall about the picture. When you first practice this exercise, any picture will do; but as you get better at it, try to use more complex pictures to make the exercise more challenging and fun. You can even turn this into a game and compete with other people to see who can recall the most details. This exercise helps develop your short-term memory and keep your mind sharp and focused.

Concentration is the ability to fix your attention for a period of time on one single thought, Action, or goal *of choice* to the exclusion of everything else.

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