



RESEARCH PAPER

**GANDHIAN WELTANSCHAUUNG OF THE SPIRITUAL AND ECOFEMINISM**

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Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by the revered spiritual master Sri Ramana Maharshi. His “warfare” against the British—guided by truth and non-violence, remained inspired by his spiritual understanding of reality. The present paper delves the depths of the Gandhian philosophy with a focus on the spiritual (based on the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi) to find how well it resonates with ecofeminism (alternate spiritualities).

**Keywords:** *Gandhian Philosophy, Spiritual, Ecofeminism, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Non-Duality.*

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From the unreal, lead me to Reality,  
From darkness lead me to Light,  
From death lead me to the Deathlessness,  
Lord of terrors, protect me ever with thy  
form benign  
Shanti! Shanti! Shanti! (M. K Gandhi)<sup>1</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by the revered spiritual master Sri Ramana Maharshi. Although Gandhi's readings of the *Gita* were extensive and he had made plain that even on his first encounter with the *Bhagwad Gita* he had:

...felt that it was not an historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that

physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. (Gandhi, *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* 35)

His “warfare” against the British—guided by truth and non-violence, remained inspired by his spiritual understanding of reality. Instead of ascribing to the four stages of life (asramas) that a spiritual seeker is expected to follow in Hindu tradition Gandhi chose to comply with the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. The four stages of life for the spiritual seekers, as also enumerated by David Godman are as under:

1. *Brahmacharya* (celibate study. A long period of scriptural study prior to marriage, usually in an institution which specialises in Vedic scholarship.



2. *Grihastha* (marriage and family). At the conclusion of his studies the aspirant is expected to marry and to discharge his business and household duties conscientiously, but without attachment to them.
3. *Vanaprastha* (forest hermit). When all family obligations have been fulfilled (which usually means when the children are married off), the aspirant may retire to a solitary place, usually a forest, and engage in full-time meditation.
4. *Sannyasa* (wandering monk). In the final stage the seeker drops out of the world completely and becomes a wandering mendicant monk. Having no material, social or financial entanglements the sanyasi has theoretically removed all the attachments which previously impeded his progress towards self-realisation. (127)

Sri Ramana did not endorse this belief system. He refused to give his devotees the permission for total renunciation of the worldly responsibilities in favour of a meditative life. He held firmly to the idea that realization was equally accessible to everyone—irrespective of their physical circumstances. Maharshi told his devotees that it would be “spiritually more productive for them to discharge their normal duties and obligations with an awareness that there was no individual ‘I’ performing or accepting responsibility for the acts which the body performed” (Godman 127-28). In fact he believed that mental attitude had greater bearing on the spiritual progress of an individual than the person’s physical circumstances. He was persistent in discouraging all questioners who felt that “a manipulation of their environment, however slight, would be spiritually beneficial” (Godman 128).

While Gandhiji’s grandson Dr. Ramachandra Gandhi himself established his link with Maharshi, there have emerged voices like that of Ramesh Rao who in the article “India Needs to Know the Real Gandhi” published in the May 2, 2011 issue of *The Guardian* emphasised that “India should know the moral ambiguity of a man revered as a saint.” Rao propounds that:

What is unremarked in many of the renderings on Gandhi is that his understanding of individual growth ignored the traditional Hindu version that sought balance between the four stages of life—brahmacharya, grihastya, vansaprastha, and sannyasa, and the four concerns of Hindus—dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. (<https://www.google.co.in/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/may/02/mahatmagandi-biography-banned-India>)

However such a remark seems far from the reality.

Gandhi’s ideas of Truth and non-violence capture the true essence of Advaita Vedanta (Purusavada), the idea that we are all part of one-consciousness i.e. soul is part of the highest metaphysical reality, in other words, the “aatma” is a part of “paramatma.” According to M. K.Gandhi:

The word satya (Truth) is derived from Sat which means ‘being’ Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why Sat or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say God is truth. [...]And where there is Truth, there is also knowledge which is true. Where there is no Truth, there also is knowledge which is true. Where there is no Truth, there can be no Truth, there can be no true knowledge. That is why the word chit or knowledge is associated with the name of God. And where there is true knowledge, there is always bliss (Ananda). There sorrow has no place and even as Truth is eternal, so is the bliss derived from it. Hence we know God as Sat-Chit-Ananda, one who combines in Himself Truth, Knowledge and Bliss.”

<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/mohandas-gandhi-on-the-meaning-of-truth>

Gandhi’s Advaita outlook of non-duality especially emerges in the statement:

The Ocean is composed of drops of water, each drop is an entity and yet it is a part of the whole ‘the one and the many.’ In this Ocean of life, we are little drops. My doctrine means that I must identify myself



with life, with everything that lives, that I must share the majesty of life in the presence of God. The sum-total of this life is God. (Fox 259)

Such an understanding comes in close proximity to the alternate spirituality that ecofeminism endorses. Especially relevant in case are the cultural ecofeminist—Spiritual ecofeminists and nature ecofeminists. Spiritual ecofeminists are often also referred to as the cultural ecofeminists. They believe that earth-based and feminist alterative spiritualities are important. U. S. ecofeminisms begin with this variant. They draw inspiration from the surviving tribal religions and prehistoric religions. It has been a major connecting link between the women of color and white ecofeminists. And it is mainly this category among the other variants that has brought the charges of essentialism on ecofeminism causing a major feminist backlash. Interestingly some distinguish between the two. Nature, or cultural, ecofeminists believe the traits traditionally associated with women (that of caring, nurturing, and intuitiveness) are the direct result of women's biology and her experiences and not her cultural construction. They do not recognize woman's closer relationship with nature as compared to man as the status of this relationship is the main problematic issue. Nature ecofeminists reject this assumed inferiority and superiority of women and nature, and men and culture, respectively. They view nature/culture as equal to and perhaps even better than "culture/man, which implies that traditional female virtues can foster improved social relations and less aggressive, and more sustainable ways of life as compared to traditional male virtues. Key names that emerge within this category of ecofeminists, namely cultural ecofeminists, are those of Mary Daly and Susan Griffin. However inspired by the line of thought, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth*, spiritual ecofeminists such as Starhawk and Charlene Spretnak reflect:

...the ways in which an anthropocentric perspective tries to justify the harms human beings inflict upon nature as well as on the ways in which an androcentric perspective tries to justify the harms men inflict upon

women, spiritual ecofeminists posit a close connection between environmental degradation and the Judeo-Christian conviction that God gave humans "domination" over the earth....they insist that no matter which theology, religion, or spirituality women adopt, it must be an embodied rather than a disembodied way of reflecting to the ultimate source....Implicit in the thought...therefore, is the view that unless "patriarchal" religions such as Judaism and Christianity can purge themselves of the idea of an omnipotent, disembodied male spirit, women should abandon the oppressive confines of their synagogues and churches and run to the open spaces of nature, where they can practice any one of a number of earth-based spiritualities. (Tong 261)

Spiritual ecofeminists may draw strength from a variety of earth-based spiritualities but they mainly gravitate towards ancient goddess worship and nature oriented Native American ritual which see the female body as sacred in turn viewing the nature as sacred, thus associating their rhythms and cycles with the sacred. Spiritual ecofeminists therefore find the role of women in biological production and the role of an archetypical "Earth Mother" or "birth mother," usually referred to as "Gaia" in giving life and creating all that exists as analogous. Such an analogy places women in her relationship to nature as privileged over men's relationship to nature. Cultural ecofeminist Mary Daly projects a lesbian-separatist-feminist stance in her *Gyn/Ecology*. Her speculation of a gynocentric world that existed before the onset of the patriarchal system of things, an ontological matriarchy that to her represented better times for women (in terms of bonding, communion, and harmony for women and nature) makes her to reject male-culture. She assumes women's acquiring of their original natural instincts (wild and lusty) would free them of the shackles of domestication and dispiriting that the cultural constraints bind her in. Contrasting women's capacity for a fuller life experience through a dynamic communion with nature and the environment around from animals to stars, she relegates men to the



confines of lack with his death-dealing powers. She explains that because men are incapable of bringing life into the world and lack of any true communion with nature they feed off women as parasites, in their envious rage, finding alternatives to “create life,” often artificial and devoid true flesh-and-blood, through technology and such legacies, as they selfishly seek endless control and domination over women and nature to satiate their ego in the face of insecurity. She associated the mainstream male-culture with death and disease. In the work *Pure Lust* (1984) she writes:

The products of necrophilic Apollonian male mating are of course the technological “offspring” which pollute the heavens and the earth. Since the passion of necrophiliacs is for the destruction of life and since their attraction is to all that is dead, dying, and purely mechanical, the fathers’ fetishized “fetuses” (reproductions/replicas of themselves), with which they passionately identify, are fatal for the future of this planet. (Daly 25)

Daly called upon women not to become “fembots” in the conspiracy of phallogocentric necrophilia which seduces women into cooperation in facilitating their and nature’s subordination. She contrasted man’s gynaeology of segmenting, substituting the fake for the real, the artificial for the natural, fixation and dismemberment, and of cutting wholes into parts as if reproduction was just another mode of production to women’s “gyn/ecology” that affirms that everything is connected, is about “discovering, developing the complex web of living/loving relationships of *our own kind*. It is about women living, loving, creating our Selves, our cosmos” (257). Daly may not have regarded women to have a special mission to rescue the earth but she definitely looked to them with a hope.

Susan Griffin recognising a special connection between the nature and women proclaimed: We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature.

Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature. (Griffin 226)

Griffin may have rejected any charges of essentialism but her writings clearly betray her in their implied as well as ontological meaning. Interestingly Griffin’s understanding of countering the destructive dualisms of Western thinking comes very close to that one finds in African American women artists’ music.

In particular, Griffin used poetry to challenge dualistic thinking, instrumentalrationality, and unbridled technology. She countered the objective, dispassionate, and disembodied voice of male culture with the subjective, passionate, embodied voice of female culture. If men can identify with machines and wonder whether machines (e.g., computers and robots) have feelings as well as thoughts, then women can identify with animals and wonder whether animals have thoughts as well as feelings. (Tong 258)

Drawing from David Maccauley, in the work *Woman and Nature*, Griffin suggested that Plato with his insistence that ideas (mind) was superior to matter, and implicitly prompting the readers to deduce that man is mind and the woman with her emotions and reproductive biology is body/matter laid the cornerstone of the dualistic hierarchical-Western-thinking, that needs to be overthrown with what Maccauley called an “antidote to Plato’s epistemological hierarchy.” This hierarchical dynamics fed the “logic of domination” (Karen Warren) resulting in the man’s domestication of women and nature in the wake of his constructed superiority, in which even women themselves prove instrumental. Griffin attributed man’s love and attachment to numbers as a consequence of these hierarchical separations. Griffin called upon women to speak, both for themselves and the natural world and to venture on a journey forsaking the confines of “culture” back into the wild, the undomesticated,— “the cave where matter and spirit merge into one, the true habitat of human beings who are more than mere ‘ideas’” (Tong 259).

Griffin also suggested that pornography within the ontological culture/nature dualism is a revenge that culture seeks over nature as well as its women. She explained: “...that the bodies of women in



pornography, mastered, bound, silenced, beaten, even murdered, are symbols for natural feeling and the powers of nature which the pornographic mind hates and fears" (*Pornography 2*). David Maccauley's comment on Griffin's idea sheds further light onto the subject:

Whether there now exists...a kind of earth pornography, since the gendered planet, the 'mother of life' or 'our nurse' as Plato referred to it, is not only violated literally by strip mining, deforestation, and radioactive waste but subjected increasingly to the circulation of a voyeuristic media—as the image of a bounded, blue sphere is replaced (away from natural contexts) on billboards or commercials in order to sell computers, hamburgers, or candidate's positions. (117)

Spiritual ecofeminist Starhawk's position becomes crystal clear from her verse: "As your labor has become her labor / Out of the bone, ash / Out of the ash, pain / Out of the pain, the swelling / Out of the swelling, the opening / Out of the opening, the labor / Out of the labor, the birth / Out of the birth, the turning / Wheel the turning tide" (Starhawk 86). Starhawk believed that the unique experiences that women through their monthly cycles of menstruation, the experience of pregnancy, the process of childbirth, the period of breast-feeding render them in a deep associative proximity and connect with nature. She came close to Daly in her opposition of necrophilia. Defending her earth-based spirituality which aimed at dissolving all dichotomies within the ontological frame of things and establishing the innate "oneness" of all things Starhawk expressed the belief that in achieving this point of omega oneness indifference is to be categorically ruled out for culture ought to be subsumed into nature rather than nature into culture for everyone to survive. In the wake of this claim it must be noted that Starhawk found ample room for feminist men in this project even though she believed that women are more likely to bring about an improved sustainable way of life. Identifying herself as a "witch" with the task of rethinking and moulding the Western culture, who practices earth-based

spirituality she stressed upon the three core facets within earth-based spirituality.

The first is *immanence*. The Goddess is in the living world, in the human, animal, plant, and mineral communities. Therefore, each being has value, and each conscious being also has power. Understood not as power-over but as power-from-within, this power is "the inherent ability...to become what we are meant to be—as a seed has within it the inherent power to root, grow, flower, and fruit." [...]

The second feature of earth-based spirituality is interconnection and the expanded view of self it encourages. Not only are our bodies natural, but so, too, are our minds, Starhawk stressed: "Our human capacities of loyalty and love, rage and humor, lust, intuition, intellect, and compassion are as much a part of nature as the lizards and the redwood forests." The more we understand that we are nature, wrote Starhawk, the more we will understand our oneness with all that exists: human beings, natural cycles and processes, animals, and plants. We will make the mistake neither of allying ourselves with human beings against nature nor of allying ourselves with nature against human beings, as some environmentalist do when they engage in extreme forms of so-called ecoterrorism....Our own interests "are linked to black people in South Africa as well as to forest-dwellers in the Amazon, and...their interests in turn are not separate from those of the eagle, the whale, and the grizzly bear."

The third and probably most important feature of earth-based spirituality is the kind of *compassionate* life-style women typically lead. Starhawk claimed that unless we care for each other, we can forget about "reweaving the world" or "healing the wounds." Thus, she faulted deep ecologist...Daniel Foreman for opposing the provision of famine relief to starving African nations. (Tong 161-63)



For Spretnak “witches” through their compassionate perspective could identify powerlessness and the structures that perpetuate it as the root cause of famine, of overpopulation, and of the callous destruction of the natural environment.

Charlene Spretnak proposed an orientation called “ecological postmodernism” that she found especially relevant to ecofeminist philosophy, radical nonduality, and as a counter to resistance existing among certain quarters of ecofeminism in acknowledging unitive dimensions of being. Proposing a version of postmodernism that would seek transformation focusing attention on the social construction of concepts without making a leap into insisting that there exists nothing save difference and social construction in human experience she moved even beyond the failed assumptions of modernity. In her essay “Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy” as included in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* she suggests:

What I call ecological (or ecological/cosmological) postmodernism acknowledges *both* the enormous role of social construction in human experience *and* our constitutive embeddedness in subtle biological, ecological, cosmological, and quantum processes about which contemporary Western society has only an extremely rudimentary level of understanding. (432-33)

Spretnak goes on to present a picture of the ontological implications of Ecological Postmodernism in detail, she purports that deconstructive postmodernists continue and intensify the conceptualization of the human offered by the Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment, with their claim that there is nothing more to life than arbitrary social construction and utter groundlessness. While these movements of modernity cumulatively framed the human story as separate to the larger unfolding story of the earth-community, deconstructive postmodernists move a step further in shrinking it through an insistence that it is entirely a matter of power plays and language games. Spretnak explained that what was required was to break out of the conceptual box that keeps modern society selfidentified apart from nature in

addition to the exposing of the power dynamics inherent in the “metanarratives” of the modern world view and a reconnection with a fuller-richer awareness of the human as an integral and dynamic manifestation of the subjectivity of the universe.

Ecological postmodernism asserts that there is a grounding for social construction and all other human endeavours. The human species does not conceptualize in pure autonomy, masterfully existing on top of nature. Yet even to discuss “grounding” or “autonomy” with relation to ecological postmodernism reveals the poverty of our inherited vocabulary. The “grounding” so central to ecological postmodernism does not refer to a foundational quantum field from which all physicality emerges as derivative manifestations. Rather, the vibratory field of matter/energy does not exist apart from its manifestations of form, which arise and pass away at the quantum level trillion of times per second. The “quantum soup” is not a base, or source, but part of the play of matter/energy. The grounding of human agency and subjectivity lies in a multiplicity of processes, such as one’s genetic inheritance of behavioural predispositions; one’s cognitive functions, which include the continuous resculpting of neuronal groups and pathways near synaptic interactions; the influence of bodily experience on metaphor, by which most conceptual thought is organized; the influence of landscape, weather, and other dynamics of one’s bioregion on imagination and mood; the self-regulating dynamics of the body-mind; the effect of daily exposures to strong and weak electromagnetic fields; and the subtle manifestations of nonlocal causality and other relational dynamics that lace the universe. (Spretnak 433)

Spretnak believed that keeping these aspects of the human experience in mind one can talk of a new sense of autonomy of an individual as way different from the old “Lone Cowboy” sense of autonomy.



Describing it as the ecological/cosmological sense of uniqueness that is coupled with intersubjectivity and interbeing, she pointed to its deeply relational sensibility that is attentive to contextual dynamics of great subtlety. Ecological postmodernism, according to Spretnak, is an orientation that offers a conceptual framework with which ecofeminist philosophy might accept radical nonduality as a dimension of relational ontology and address the objections from deconstructionist, feminist, and modern perceptual quarters.

...ecological postmodernism challenges the deconstructionist insistence that all relationship in human experience is inherently repressive with respect to (an idealized) autonomy. Cosmological, ecological, biological, and historically generated social relationships in and around an individual can evoke the unfolding of profound subjectivity, or inferiority. To the deconstructionist objection that any universal frame of reference is merely "substitutionalist universalizing" and is inherently "totalizing," ecological postmodernism responds that the universal, or cosmological, gestalt does not obliterate the gestalt of an atom, a cell, an organism, or a holonic subsystem within an ecosystem. Any particular level of focus will always yield partial knowledge and involve a larger context.

Reading the feminist concern about the "ecological self" being interpreted by male ecophilosophers as an expansion of the masculine ego, one cannot rule out that sort of projection on the part of some, but ego aggrandizement is contraindicated by the appreciation in ecological postmodernism for the astounding diversity and profound difference in the universe.

The feminist concern that loosely defined boundaries of self have historically been encouraged for women in order to exploit them and the related fear that the modern construction of the individual would be annihilated by acknowledging radical nonduality are both addressed by the

honouring of polyvalent perception in ecological postmodernism: the subjectivity of every manifestation in the universe is as real and precious as its far-reaching participation in systems of vast proportion. (Spretnak 434)

Spretnak offers the most compelling argument for ecological postmodernism, with its thrust on radical nonduality in the quest for alternatives to dualistic thinking, to gain affirmation from ecofeminism, when she states that human apprehension of the countless modes of dynamic relation will always be decidedly incomplete, perceptual habits of absolutist delineation and overbearing reductionism long imbued by dualistic thinking haunt contemporary efforts to move beyond patriarchal, authoritarian, exploitative societies to new possibilities, the ecofeminist critique of dualism needs to be joined not only with an appreciation of pluralism but also with an open-minded consideration of unitive dimensions of being, and that ontology based on dynamic and admittedly partial knowledge as well as awe toward the complexity of embodied and embedded existence would contribute substantially to the profound social transformation that is needed.

Gandhi's idea of the spiritual took form way early in life. The seeds of it were planted by his nurse Rambha who taught him the practice of repeating "Ramanama" whenever he was faced by any fear in his mind, almost in a manner of a Guru who as an initiation rite provides the disciple with a "mantra." According to Sri Ramana Maharshi if "the Guru has accumulated spiritual power as a result of his realisation or meditation, some of this power is transmitted in the *mantra*. If the disciple ("sadhaka") repeats the word continuously, the power of the Guru is invoked in such a way that it helps the disciple to progress towards the goal of self-realisation" (Godman 119). However, though Sri Ramana Maharshi emphasized the practice of "namajapa" (the continuous repetition of God's name) he rarely gave out mantras himself. For him the importance of this namajapa lied in its effectiveness of surrendering to God. He believed that it could help one remember and be aware at all times that there is no individual or "I" acting and



thinking but rather a higher divine power that is responsible for what all actions are being performed in the world.

Gandhi's vegetarian outlook and his idea of ahimsa also places him in a close proximity to ecofeminism. According to Gandhi:

Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man. Destruction is not the law of the humans. Man lives freely by his readiness to die, if need be, at the hands of his brother, never by killing him. Every murder or other inquiry no matter for what cause, committed or inflicted on another is a crime against humanity. The first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of Life....Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence....The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear. He reckons not if he should lose his land, his wealth, his life. He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice *ahimsa* to perfection. The votary of *ahimsa* has only one fear, that is of God. He who seeks refuge in God ought to have a glimpse of the *Atma* that transcends the body; and the moment one has a glimpse of the imperishable *Atma* one sheds the love of the perishable body. Training in non-violence is thus diametrically opposed to training in violence. Violence is needed for the protection of things external, non-violence is needed for the protection of the *Atma*, for the protection of one's honour. It is non-violence if we merely love those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those that hate us. (UNESCO 85-6)

Therefore, Gandhi's idea of ahimsa too echoes the Advaita philosophy where *atma's* identity of being a part of *paramatma* is again emphasised. The strength required to practice ahimsa is a result of this profound understanding.

His inclination towards vegetarianism too had a spiritual situatedness, partly if not in entirety. In *India's Caste for Swaraj* he states: "I do feel that spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures for the satisfaction of our bodily wants" (404). The idea reiterates Sri Ramana's belief in the Hindu dietary theory which classifies different foods on the basis of the mental states they are capable of inducing. The classification is enlisted as under:

1. *Sattva* (purity or harmony) Dairy produce, fruit, vegetables and cereals are deemed to be *sattvic* foods. A diet which consists largely of these products helps spiritual aspirants to maintain a still, quiet mind.
2. *Rajas* (activity) *Rajasic* foods include meat, fish and hot spicy foods such as chillies, onions and garlic. Ingestion of these foods results in an overactive mind.
3. *Tamas* (sluggishness) Foods which are decayed, stale or the product of a fermentation process (e.g. alcohol) are classified as *tamasic*. Consumption of these foods leads to apathetic, torpid states of mind which hamper clear decisive thinking. (Godman 128)

This vegetarianism finds resonance in the "contextual moral vegetarianism" that Karen Warren offers in *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective On What It and Why it Matters* where she emphasises the need to stop unnecessary and avoidable pain to animals.

Thus, it may be stated that the Gandhian philosophy of the spiritual, based on the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, resonates profoundly with ecofeminism. Just as ecofeminism calls for inclusiveness and a bridging up of the gaps between the centre and the margins as it establishes all oppressions to be in a dialectical relationship and offers a repose in alternate spirituality, Gandhian idea of non-duality offered a way of life that bridged all sorts of dualisms and hierarchical frameworks and to resist oppression of all kinds.

#### NOTES

1. From an inscription Gandhiji had written on one of his portraits that he gave an editor.

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