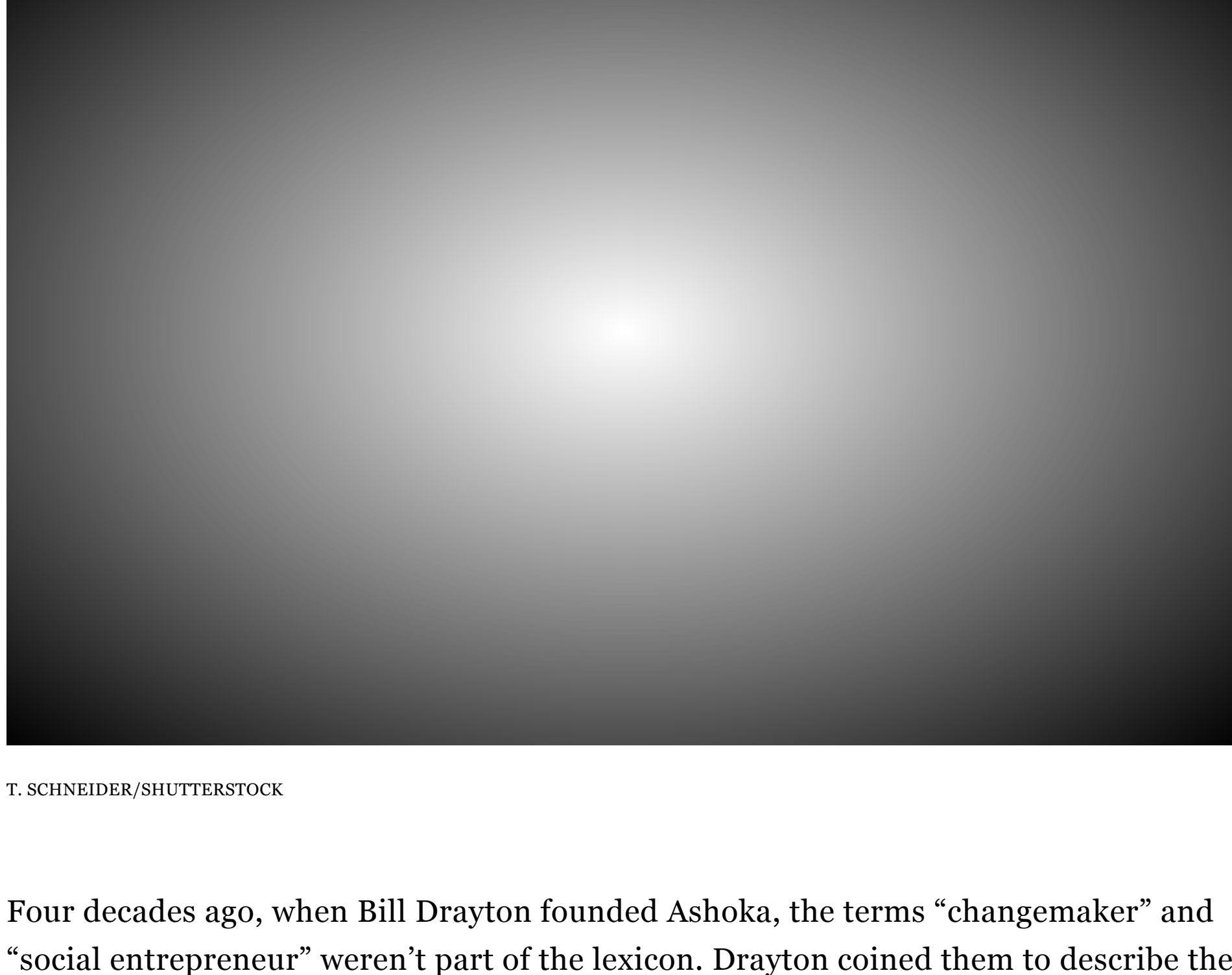


Bill Drayton on Ashoka’s Work to Make “Everyone a Changemaker”

Liz Longley | March 11, 2024



T. SCHNEIDER/SHUTTERSTOCK

Four decades ago, when Bill Drayton founded Ashoka, the terms “changemaker” and “social entrepreneur” weren’t part of the lexicon. Drayton coined them to describe the global movement he was launching, which he envisioned as a community of innovators who make it their life’s purpose to solve social issues.

Today, Ashoka is engaged in two major missions. One is to create a network of the world’s leading social entrepreneurs, people who can find system-changing solutions for humanity’s most pressing social problems. And the other is to foster a global culture around the idea of “good for all” and the idea that everyone has the capacity to be a changemaker.

The ideas that Drayton and Ashoka spearheaded have since become deeply embedded across the social sector and have widely influenced the world of philanthropy.

Recently, we asked Drayton to share his thoughts on the community-building that has become Ashoka’s hallmark, lessons on how the organization draws funders to work, and his vision of what’s next.

Building a community

In its early days, Ashoka’s theory of change held that putting a system-changing idea in the hands of the right person, a social entrepreneur, could create the “**most powerful force in the world.**” Drayton sought out the best such individuals to become Ashoka Fellows, a network of more than 3,800 lifelong members across 95 countries.

Drayton continues to put Ashoka’s network of social entrepreneurs “at the heart” of its community and considers them essential to both its past and its future. Fellows played a critical role in establishing Ashoka’s initial framework, as well as the concept of social entrepreneurship itself. “Once that idea is in people’s heads all across the world,” Drayton said, people “know that they have the option of caring and organizing. Moreover, as their number increases, the pattern of what social entrepreneurship is becomes ever clearer.”

Ashoka Fellows get a tailored stipend for up to three years, as needed, to allow them to dedicate themselves to advancing their ideas full time. They also receive customized engagement opportunities aimed at lifting visibility and accelerating impact. Becoming a social entrepreneur puts them in the path of funding sources like private funders, corporations and family foundations. Ashoka’s nonrestricted funding is also “critical” to supporting fellows, as well as funding for specific initiatives that align with their projects in issue areas like planet and climate, tech, humanity and gender.

Drayton shared how Ashoka encourages its community to function as “one big organism” in ways that are “deeply both intentional and organic.” Basic guidelines for network-building start with establishing a “strong ethical filter” that allows members to feel safe with one another — something Drayton considers a “knockout factor” for everyone coming into Ashoka.

Next is creating a home for community members that emphasizes shared traits like an aptitude for “learning, sharing and “co-venturing.” Core membership requirements include a “very high level of entrepreneurial quality and social and emotional intelligence,” along with qualities like creativity and the ability to focus upon the “how-to dimension of life.”

Members of the community embrace an open-source model to find solutions. Ashoka encourages fellows “do a great deal with one another inside the community” and learn from each other. For example, fellows with questions find support through organized coffees or dinners that allow other members to join in and brainstorm. “What better way of learning a field you don’t know?” Drayton said.

Everyone a changemaker

In 2005, Ashoka drew on its fellows’ feedback to shift its framework to one that recognizes everyone as a changemaker, and the power of equipping all individuals to create positive change, broadening a base built on entrepreneurs and fellows.

Three years later, the work became decidedly youth-centric. In 2008, Ashoka launched a school-based program to catalyze social innovation in higher education. A program to develop empathy, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving at the elementary, middle and high school levels soon followed.

Doubling down on youth, Ashoka launched a Young Changemakers program in 2018, comprising young people seeking to create large-scale, positive change and spread “good for all.” The program was followed by Ashoka U, a higher-ed-focused model aimed at helping students gain the skills and confidence to create change.

This focus on youth empowerment is rooted in Drayton’s own formative experience starting his own school newspaper and watching its circulation grow from his own single class to “kids from lots of schools.”

Drayton said the Ashoka community is “setting out to change the decision-making architecture” so that today’s youth can have what he and “earlier generations had — the freedom to do things and therefore learn.”

“A wide-ranging community of funders”

As anyone seeking support for big ideas and systemic change knows, securing funding has its challenges. Drayton’s approach to meet those challenges includes connecting with like-minded partners and providing funders with the kind of real-world data they need to measure outcomes.

Drayton characterized Ashoka’s funders as a “wide-ranging community of funders, investors and partners,” and maintains that partnership development is key to Ashoka’s success. “We’ve found that the best relationships are when it’s a true partnership where we are able to offer the partner opportunities to have a truly big impact, and where doing so helps the partner adapt [their research findings] as core strategy.”

Ashoka’s annual revenue stood at roughly \$46 million as of 2022. Often, Ashoka’s funders are entrepreneurs themselves, people who can “intuitively understand the power of our individual members and of our community especially quickly and easily,” Drayton said. “Moreover, they ask the sort of deeply probing ‘how-to’ questions that are so much a part of the life and thinking of major pattern-change entrepreneurs.” Drayton mentioned that business entrepreneurs, especially, share the kind of single-minded commitment to an idea that’s “strikingly similar” to the way social entrepreneurs operate.

Among Ashoka’s backers from the world of business is Boehringer-Ingelheim, one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies. It joined with Ashoka to promote health solutions for more than a decade. Another partnership with C&A Foundation, the charitable arm of the global fashion retailer, works to improve both safety and accountability in the fashion value chain. And a media partnership with *Forbes* in North, Central and South America promotes the work of Ashoka’s network of social entrepreneurs.

Notably, Ashoka received a \$10 million gift from MacKenzie Scott’s Yield Giving in 2021 for work to strengthen the nonprofit sector. Foundation supporters include the [Knight Foundation](#), the [Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund](#), the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#), [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), [Swiss Re Foundation](#) and [Robert Bosch Stiftung](#), one of Europe’s leading foundations, known for work in natural and social sciences. Taco Bell Foundation, a grantmaker with a focus on youth education and career readiness, also supports its work.

Measuring change

Because the purpose of social entrepreneurship is to change all of society, Drayton said measuring impact is important for both Ashoka and the entire field. Ashoka’s social entrepreneurs help provide that data. “Every three years, we have a detailed survey with university analysis that measures both the impact of the fellows and the impact of Ashoka on the fellows,” Drayton said.

He cited three entrepreneurs inside Ashoka who have developed “three different, powerful measures of the level of changemaking in individuals and organizations.” That work, he believes, will be “very important for investment, for management, for health, for industry,” and for students making college decisions.

Drayton said that schools that adopt Ashoka’s approaches have also shown improvement across three traditional measures: “Many hundreds of evaluations show consistently that math scores improve, language scores improve and bullying rates go down.”

Drayton also pointed to Ashoka’s influence “on major framework and pattern changes nationally, continent wide and globally,” and well as new ways to measure, like framework development. For example, he cited the degree to which the language Ashoka created “made it into the dictionary about a decade ago and is now very common and still spreading and multiplying. That spread is a measure of framework change.”

Changes ahead

So what lies ahead for an organization built on the idea of change?

Today, Ashoka’s work focuses on finding tipping points in society that create space for widespread systemic change and critical issues that can benefit from the problem-solving power of collaborative entrepreneurship: networks of entrepreneurs, and partners in business, government, academia and other influencers.

Work is aimed at addressing the rising anger and desperation of everyone on the “wrong side of the new inequality” — people who are being left behind as the game changes from one that values repetition and institutions to one that thrives on an accelerated response to change.

Count on much of that work to concentrate on youth. Drayton considers allowing even one young person to slip into the “new inequality” as “totally unacceptable, totally unethical.” Within Ashoka, this shift is already underway. A full third of the work of Ashoka’s social entrepreneurs focuses on new generations, a cohort for whom “the ability to change has gone from challenge to necessity.”

But one thing hasn’t changed. Even at a time when the idea that all people have the social agency to improve their lives seems to be challenged from all sides, Drayton remains committed to the idea of finding individual purpose in boosting good for all.

“What is the greatest gift one can give?” he asked. “It’s the power to give. The moment someone understands this, they have a sense of the inner logic, the overwhelming gravitational power of this new world.”

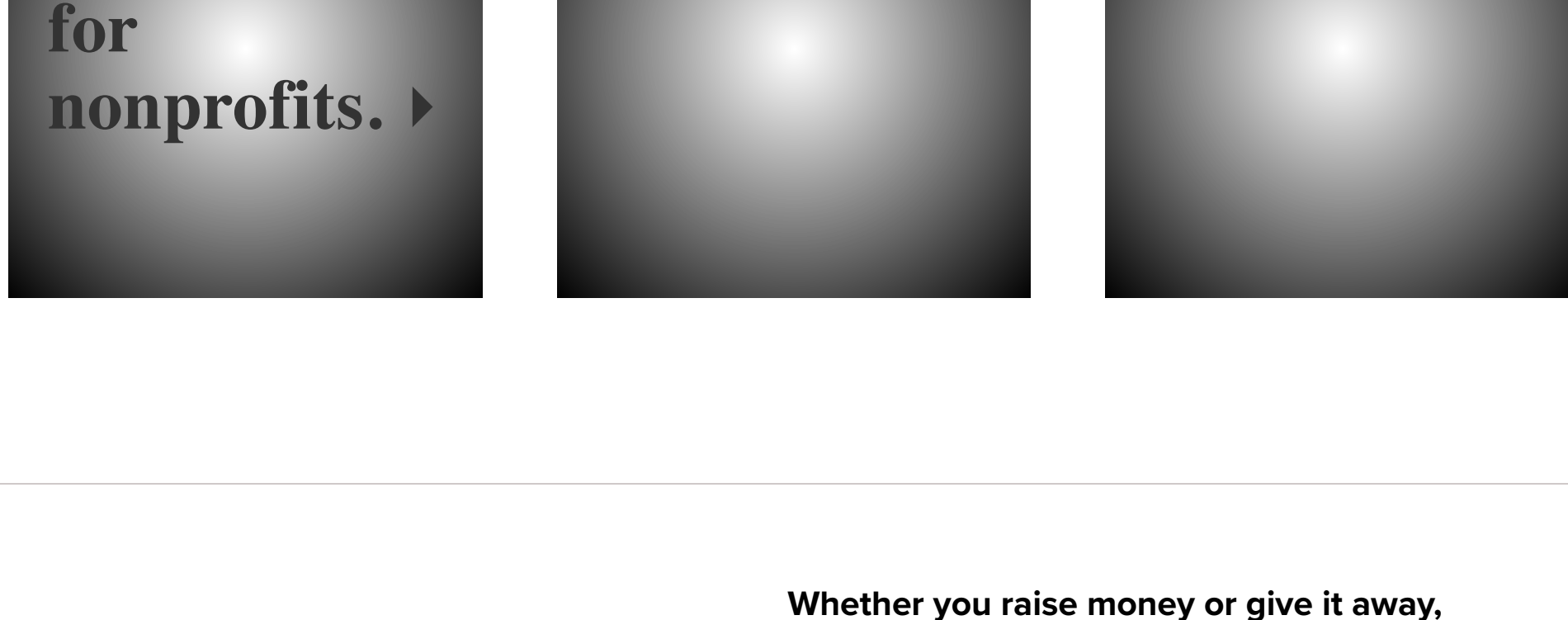
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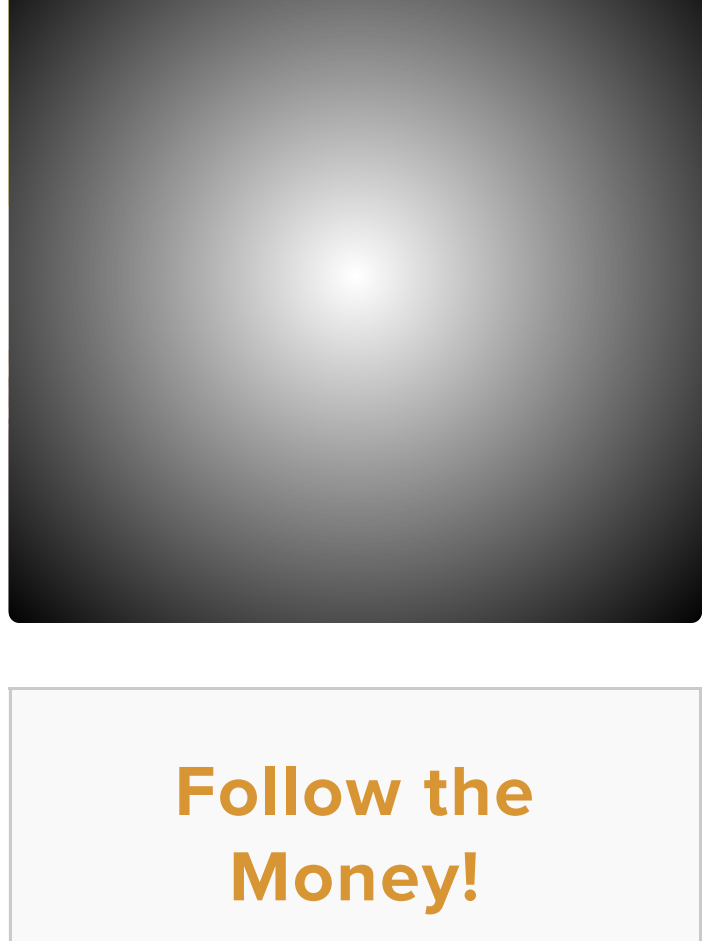
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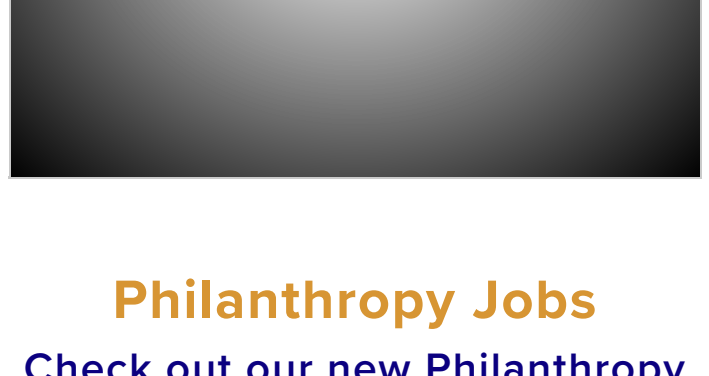
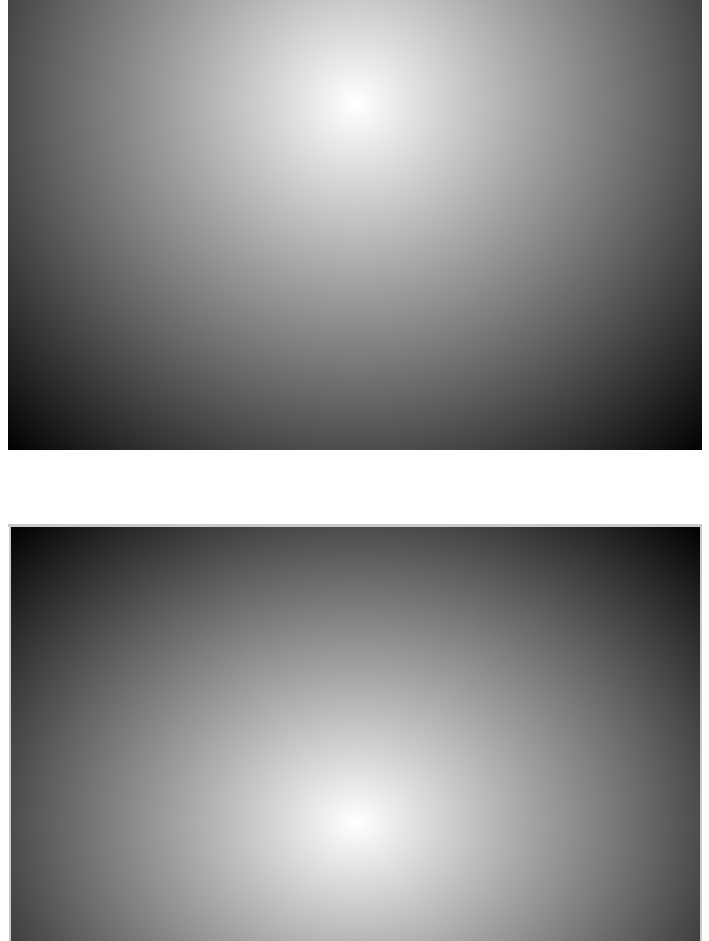
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