

by Paula Josa-Jones

These notes grew out of Eiko & Koma's *Delicious Movement Workshop*, at their rambling yellow farmhouse in the Catskills in August of 1984. The interview took place in May 1985, the result of my continuing excitement about the ideas generated at this workshop.

Nine of us shared "the pleasure and misery of a house 8 miles from town, 3 miles from nearest village, and 1.5 miles from nearest grocery store." Each day's "work" consisted of the morning body awakening class, and the evening's movement sequence class. Those who wished were encouraged in the weaving of individual performance work. Afternoons were leisurely and open—swimming, hiking, reading, moving, thinking, alone or with others. The effect of this gentle but insistent teaching and sharing was startling, scary, and deeply moving.

Eiko and Koma were raised in post-war Japan. Their collaboration began in 1971 and developed into an exclusive partnership. They moved to New York City in 1976 and since then they have presented original full-evening work across the United States and Europe. Eiko and Koma studied with Obno and Hijikata, both central figures in the Japanese avant-garde theatrical movement, as well as with Manja Chmiel, the disciple of German dancer Mary Wigman.

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Getting lost on the way to Eiko & Koma's Delicious Movement Workshop proved to be a metaphor for the whole two weeks. Getting lost is what I did, what I knew I needed most to do, and what I feared and hoped I'd do.

Paula: When I first arrived, on the very first day, within the first hour, you said something that told me immediately that I was in the right place. You said, "We don't want to hunt for the dance, we want to distill to the dance." How do you nourish that freshness in yourself?

Eiko: Very difficult. I feel that we are almost into the life right now where we have to hunt, not for the dance, but for the movement.

Movement is limitless, yet we do not want to exhibit every possible thing our bodies can do. Being dancers, we cannot help a bit of hunting attitude in both improvisation in the studio and in observation in daily life. But since we don't (and don't want to) make a dancework too often (maybe once in one or two years), we do not want to jump into working on a dance with a concept which is just hunted. It should be some theme that slowly comes up as a concern which we cannot help but deal with. Making the dance is one way to deal with our concern, and for that we weave movements which may have been hunted but somehow stay with us because they connect to the theme unconsciously or kinetically. Then within the choreographic process we simplify the movement phrases, throwing out what we don't mind losing. Hopefully it is close to distilling so that

we don't just do the movement right away, but wait until it is connected to the life, so it comes a little closer.

Kindergarten Kids. From Eiko watching how children in a group are going in all different directions. Parts of the body moving off on their own, with separate minute initiations. Nearly without volitional movement, and so small as to be nearly invisible to the observer. It feels completely undancelike. Not "I take my head here, and my arm there," but suddenly my elbow has moved a centimeter somewhere and my ribs are billowing a little and I am not doing it.

Paula: Does your work have a relationship to traditional dance "form" either in Japan or in Western culture?

Koma: I think it relates very much. But it is a relationship more to the body character or body ethics that we share. Traditional could be Japanese, Asian, Balinese, Korean, Chinese. . . but we never studied any traditional dance.

Eiko: You start with what you have and slowly you begin to see where you want to go. It obviously depends on your ethics and physicality which is not free from the culture in which you were brought up. We cannot help having more sympathy kinetically to Asian traditional dance forms though we could not possibly be the ones who protect and pass on the tradition.

Koma: It did not take us long to find that neither of us possessed the receptivity to Western dance technique and rhythmicality. We did not mind since we lacked motivation and talent to qualify as competitive dancers.

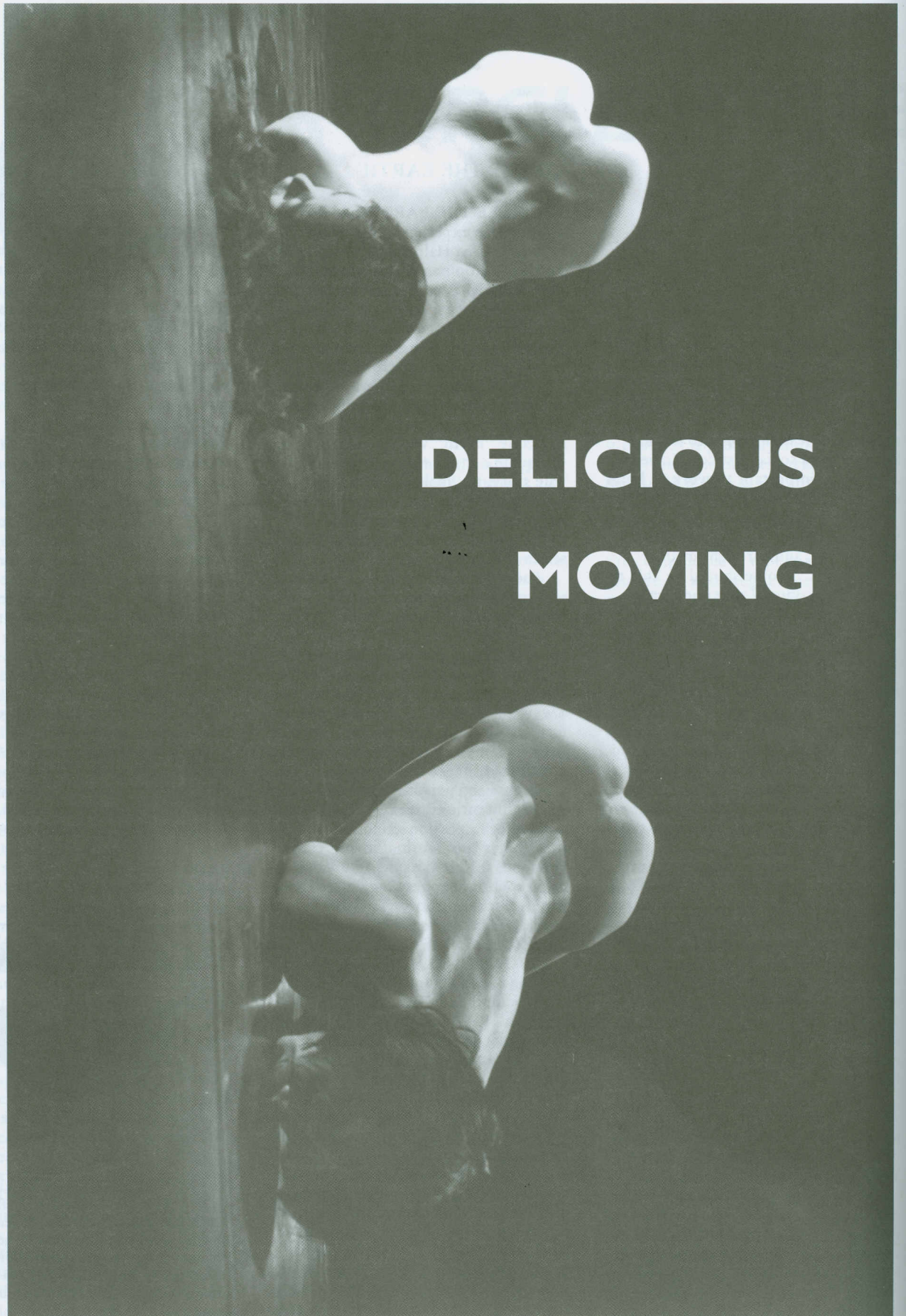
Eiko: If the 60's were the starting point of our adulthood, then the end of conventional dance training was the start of our dancing excitements. We do not want to dictate for ourselves or for other people.

The Lotus and the Pond. A slight softening, hollowing just above the breast, in the space inside of the shoulder. It feels a little like receiving, like a humility in the offering of the body, an accomodation to some invisible presence. It makes the body a little off center, in a kind of whole body melting letting in. It doesn't feel like anything I've ever encountered in any dance class anywhere.

Paula: In class, we worked a lot with the "basic stance". Why is that important?

Eiko: I think it is based on, like the classical ballet stance, our trying to share our ethics of the body. In ballet, you want long legs, and you want to be high, and you have to

photo: Beatriz Schiller



DELICIOUS MOVING

Eiko & Koma in "Night Tide"

train yourself, because if you're not trained you can't get it right. Same thing applies. Koma and I find it beautiful when the weight is low, but not stuck. Being able to get up and do things, and go down, without thinking, "Oh, am I going down again? Am I to stand up again?" Without effort. We like that, so our stance has a lower base, yet a kind of freedom. There are certain movements which I cannot do well and I don't mind. We should not live just to train everything, that is working against the body. But there are certain movements and body nuances I cannot do or do not have, and I feel sad. Then certain exercises are needed. Our stance is the first common ground for the work to which we are connected, and it may be only a temporary common ground in the workshop process.

Paula: The stance is asymmetrical, a little wilted, which is quite unlike, say, first position in ballet. And each person can find their own way into the basic stance.

Eiko: Right. Each person can strive to have their own stance.

Koma: Our general interest is to make movement based on our own body characters. Movement which has profound nuance, but not expressionistic stabilization.

Survey. Exploring the surfaces of a part of the body—a knee or an elbow or a hip or the face. Start on the floor and then let the survey move into the air. I find that the movement that the rest of my body is doing in accomodating this painstaking, slow, accurate investigation is as interesting as the part I am surveying. Try to survey three parts at once. Impossible! Let the surface you move over seep into your pores. Survey with a partner as an extension of the landscape, and let them come in through your pores.

Paula: What is the significance for you, of working with such extreme sustainment? Do you find that that frustrates you ever, or frustrates your audience?

Eiko: We hope the sustainment is understood to be necessary to the significance of the happening—the dance concert. Nothing satisfies everybody. Therefore it only makes sense that we try to follow our discipline and conscience and hopefully we can relate to some of the audience. We work not to frustrate ourselves, otherwise there is no point in dancing. Unless we reveal ourselves, how can one ever have the chance to be connected to the space and to audience. But our discipline is flexible and changeable throughout the practice and feedback process. Sometimes we can get uncomfortable because an audience is restless. This is an inevitable part of performance—each person dealing with a different kinetic time sense.

Paula: Do you ever move fast?

Koma: For me, I don't have a sense about fast or slow.

Eiko: It is more about enough or not enough. We do know when we don't do enough, or if we are hasty.

Sometimes Koma will say "Today your solo was too long," and I say "I couldn't help it. It took the time it needed to take."

Koma: Each movement is explored in the manner it deserves and with the time sense it requires to flourish.

Eiko: To allow interaction between audience and performers, the piece has to be slow paced and slim. We want to just be there, doing something simple, instead of confronting the audience with many elements. The space has to be quite empty to reveal us. We are learning to take enough time (though not more than necessary and never a stop) so that the visible movement really almost started after registering its image to the audience. In order to do that invisible movement should be already starting to give the motivation of the next movement, rather sneakily. This effort we call "serious tricks" because one careless move would destroy the reality created by the layers of time.

This is a way of generously attending to each thread of a work, rather than spinning off yard after yard of indiscriminate fabric. It flies in the face of the dancer/choreographer's urgency to keep moving, and speaks to our fear of stillness, our unwillingness to be seen, and the tyranny of momentum.

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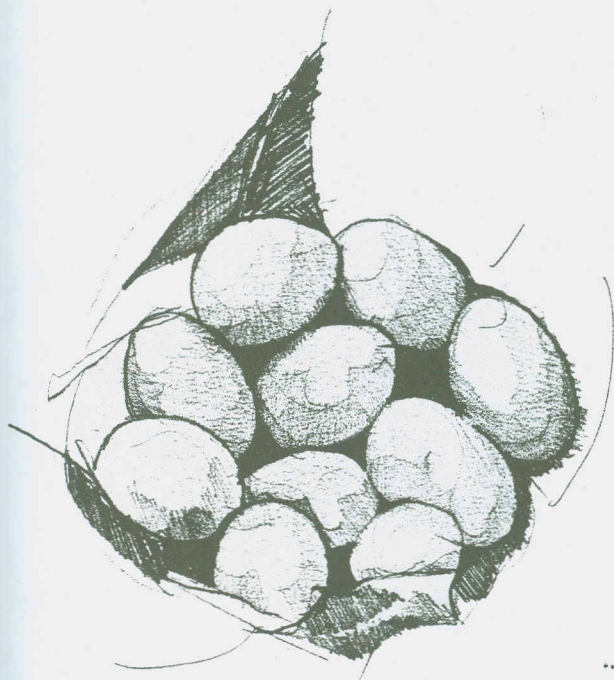
Space Hunting. Ask my elbow/shoulder/arm, where haven't you been today? Find some new way of getting there, taking lots of time along the way to notice the subtly changing relationships, to really discover, to be delighted by movements so small, I would have ignored them before. Space Hunt with more than one body part at once. Watch out for seductive symmetries.

Paula: Much of the work that you did in the morning class felt like it came from some of the body therapies, but went beyond function into changing the way your body works expressively. I am referring to the work called Survey, Space Hunting, Inner Flow. What are the sources of that work?

Eiko: I have never really studied body therapies. I have one teacher, Elaine Summers, who calls her work kinetic awareness, and our German teacher (Manja Chmiel) did some body training.

Koma: We respect their sincerity toward the body as a part of nature, but somehow we were not good students.

Paula: So you have created the terms Inner Flow, Survey, etc., as descriptive means of helping the student into the material.



Eiko: We call them nicknames. We are always nicknaming. Otherwise it is hard to keep them straight. I am hoping that the way that we teach is not just making or re-making the body, but is sharing our body ethics. The material is ours, something you can adopt into your ethics or you can throw it out.

Koma: But as you know, the morning exercise contributes a lot to the evening work.

Description of the evening class from the workshop brochure: "In a given structure, concentration is facilitated, and in a passive-equal-active state, the imagination has freer reign. Attention is paid to the distinction between arbitrary and necessary movement so that students can cross over them in a controlled but spontaneous way." I called them bedtime stories. At night we use the principles from the day class, but using series of exotic and oddly connected image fragments which make a kind of dream-real story.

Paula: Do the stories that you used in the evening class originate from you or from your culture?

Eiko: From our own needs. For example, if Koma is making some movement, and I know something is not quite working, and he asks my advice, I don't say "Your arm has to be different," but I make some kind of little image to encourage him to continue his exploration. The same is true for our students.

Paula: Like a visualization.

Eiko: Right. However, after you get the idea, you don't need it anymore, otherwise we get confined to one image. It's a good teaching method. There is no point in our struggling against the student's ethics and history. If we just talk in technical terms, we end up confronting and conflicting with their training which has given them a certain way of moving. Instead we say, just leave it here, forget it for now, rather than trying to destroy what they are stuck with.

Notes to me from the evening's class: Blur the edges more; use the image of holding a thread, and disappear behind the thread, so that all that is revealed is the hanging thread and its movement. Fragility makes the movement more shadowy, and seems to create more nuance. I feel so dense, and as if everything is too clear. All the years of form are in my way, and it is as if I can only move in primary colors.

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Crazy House! We all come down and don costumes and make up as Koma sets up the speakers throughout the house. Our task is to explore freely the movement materials we have developed so far for 1½ hours. We feel scared and excited. I spend a lot of time upside down in the bathtub. Have a long weird duet with Urte that makes me feel very sad. Sometimes I feel very foolish, and other times like I'm flying netless on a huge dream trapeze.

Paula: Is the Crazy House something that comes out of your work with Kazuo Ohno?

Eiko: Yes, that's what he does.

Paula: I did a Crazy House this year with my students in a composition class. It was wonderful and terrifying, and took us deeply to places we would not have reached with traditional improvisation.

Eiko: Because you can get lost. It is a total challenge.

Paula: And that is scary.

Eiko: Very scary, and that's what we did with him every week. But sometimes the class gets stale, because you kind of start to know how to be lost, superficially, every week, and then you aren't lost anymore. You start to learn some kind of "style". Frequently, with Mr. Ohno, people leave for awhile and then return, to keep that kind of freshness.

Second Crazy House. I am bumping up against all my limitations (floor, space, people, music, viewers, other self-imposed trips). Boredom, stuckness, frustration. Don't look at me, I don't know what I am doing.

Paula: In the description for your workshop, you talk about exploring the distinction between arbitrary and necessary movement. What does that mean?

Eiko: I feel frustrated if in a performance the body and movements are the only things that matter. Then the whole thing feels arbitrary, not needed for anybody—ornamental. Yet it is impossible to define necessary movements or necessary anything. We wish to be spare and necessary, yet how can you say this is necessary and this is not?

Koma: And sometimes the unnecessary thing is necessary!

Eiko: It's like a festival. In our culture, or in every culture, human beings need festivity. It's not necessary, but it is. And you can tell by looking at a baby when he is hungry, when he starts to do lots of fussing, he needs urgently to be fed. When he is content, he does a kind of arbitrary movement, which is necessary too. But the distinction is there.

Paula: It has a different function.

Eiko: Right, it's a nuance, and I like them both. However, there should be a good balance between the two, otherwise the activity becomes self-absorbed.

Being simple. Getting up and down in a simple way. Not spiralling, not spinning hastily up from an equally smoothswirly fall. Just rising and sinking. Slowly. Sneaking down. Changing without changing. Getting from one place to another without demonstrating/showing how I did that.

I have to learn to hold all this information loosely in the palm of my hand so that it can spill out when it becomes awkward to hold.

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Changing the depth of focus has to do with avoiding the presentational or frozen "dancer's look". But it is more complex than that. It is like scanning, but depth (sagittal) scanning, rather than tracing the horizon. Sometimes the eyes play in close, on a strand of hair fallen over the eyes. Not inner (self-absorbed), but drifting—like sending the eyes out into the space. The effect is profound and changes the way the head rests on the spine.

Paula: There seems to be a very important part of your work which has to do with humility. For me, that was most expressed in the work with the eyes, the changing depth of focus, and also the image of working with the thread, or erasing oneself to reveal something other than the personality. It radically changes the whole relationship of the performer to the audience and the performer to herself. Where does that originate?

Eiko: That is pretty much coming from our own experiments. Because there are only two of us, we either do a

duet or solo, and I think the duet is tiresome if it is just a duet, and the solo is lonesome if it is just a solo. That's from my audience point of view. I like it when the performer is not acting like she has everything to offer, but has another involvement.

Paula: Can you explain that?

Eiko: Not that she has a treasure or a magic thing. That is too tedious. Just some simple thing that makes a triangle: your dancing, me (the audience), and something else—such as the theme or music or props, which does not quite belong to her yet. That makes a nice triangle, rather than a straight line between the audience and the performer. The straight line can get cranky because it depends on the performer's intention too much, where the triangle gives us more space. We are looking together at the flowing content of the triangle.

Paula: It also gives it more layers of meaning for both the performer and the audience.

Koma: We make duets as an extension of solos, and our solos are the duets with invisible partners. We often co-exist on stage doing our own business, or relate to each other as part of a landscape or as an object.

It is important to leave space in the dance for the audience not to limit what they are seeing, and for you, the performer, not to know exactly where you are at a given time—for both of you to be a little lost and looking. That lostness seems to bring a kind of softness to the performance, to make the communication between performer and viewer somehow more intimate, like a voyage taken together, rather than a guided tour.

Paula: One of the most significant things for me was the idea of being lost or being stuck. Do you differentiate between those terms?

Eiko: No, they are the same. Being lost is very important, it's our starting point—to get lost and to get stuck. And that's also pretty much how we started dancing. We didn't start by trying to be wonderful dancers, but because there was nothing else we could do. We were lost and we were stuck, and there was no point for us not to begin that way. We are still lost and trying to see more of ourselves and society in the context of nature.

Koma: But dancing has become our occupation now, so it is a little bit different. We are concert dancers, which is completely different from some Asian dancers who might perform occasionally while engaged in other productive work such as farming or fishing.

Eiko: What we are doing now is trying to choose the essence of the movement. Having been with this work now for more than twelve years we have begun to feel what is our share. We see other people doing this and that, and it is great, but you feel it's not quite your concern. We feel our task is trying to go bottom line. You can't do everything, but you can do one thing which is connecting to your concern, and for us that still means being lost and stuck. That is our reality and not the policy.



Eiko (right) & Koma in "Trilogy"

Koma: But it is very hard to tell what kind of situation will make us stuck on the stage.

Eiko: Yes, it is, because it could be artificial if you cheaply make the situation. But being stuck and lost, you have a good relationship with the audience, because it is likely that some of them are stuck and lost, and that's where you feel kind of connected. Without presenting the solution, or ornamental sophistication, you can still face communal energy.

We think this is very important, especially when we teach. Students too often have too many things to do, and everything is placed. If they are content with their discipline then they should have no reason to be with us.

Koma: That's why our material is different. It's like when you first saw that Japanese sweet wrapped with bamboo leaves. Before eating, you said, "What's this?" You got puzzled, you know, "How can I eat this?"

Eiko: If you are content with what you have, you just take it as an exotic oddity. You do not digest diversity. However, like you, who had enough of those things, so you feel, "Well, I have that part. I am ready for other things."

Paula: I'm still hungry.

Eiko: Right. And being hungry, you can allow yourself to get a little lost, and that makes you more open, more versatile.

Delicious means that you are excited about what you are cooking!

Paula: Why do you think it is so hard for Westerners to let go of knowing exactly where they are in space, knowing the form, the end, the place?

Eiko: I think it is hard for everybody. I think even the most wonderful Asian people, or the Black people from Africa, if they are lost in the big field, they feel scared. It is physical. But, they may be a little more used to it, or have had the experience of being lost and have found a way back from being deep in the field to their own place.

As long as you do not hurt another being, it is good to insist on something, to have a bit of madness, to really find something and stay enough time with it, push it but without pushing, just be lost and alone with it. Taste it. ☆