

Emerson's passion for Indian thought

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Abstract: The first group of American thinkers who seriously examined non-Western spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism was the Transcendentalists. The prominent members of this group included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Peabody. In general, the Transcendentalists argued for a non-dogmatic and more universalistic perspective of life and the world. As the intellectual guru of this group, Emerson "represent[ed] the best in the spiritual explorer" (Moore 74). Unlike most of his predecessors and contemporaries, he was sensitive to and passionate about non-Western spiritual traditions and philosophies. Today, the sources of Emerson's knowledge and inspiration are of particular interest to the critics and researchers of comparative literature. In this article, I explore Emerson's passion for Indian thought with specific reference to Brahma, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the laws of *karma*.

Keywords: Emerson, Indian thought, Brahma, *Gita*, *Karma*

1. Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson was America's poet-prophet. He is remembered primarily for his endeavor to elevate the spiritual landscape of the American psyche. Emerson was born in 1803 in Boston, USA. He lost his father when he was only eight and was raised by his mother. Emerson lived his whole life in Massachusetts and became the leading member of a group known as Transcendentalists. His beliefs and ideas may be summarized by one of his own sentences: "Can anyone doubt that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, and noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian, M[a]nu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse together, they would find themselves of one religion?" (Buell xx). Before proceeding to discuss how Indian thought influenced Emerson's ideas and works, it is important that I briefly focus on the movement known as Transcendentalism.

2. What is Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism, or American Transcendentalism, was a multi-faceted movement. It introduced freethinking in religion, intuitive idealism in philosophy, individualism in literature, new spirit in social reforms, and new optimism in peoples' mind. This New England movement flourished in

a period between 1830 and 1860. One of the beginning marks of this movement was the Transcendental Club meeting held at George Ripley's home in Boston in the fall of 1836. As an intellectual movement, Transcendentalism was influenced by Romanticism and post-Kantian idealism, and its major exponents were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. Initially, it started its journey as a religious movement, but shortly it addressed many other issues of the contemporary time.

Transcendentalism's influence is clearly visible in many American movements—be it religious, literary, political, or philosophical. With regard to religion, it introduced freethinking and reasoning in understanding and practicing religion. In fact, it was the first revolt against historical Christianity as it rejected religious forms, creeds, rituals, and the literal explanations of scriptures. Instead, it aspired to reach for an authentic religious experience. Establishing an original relationship with God and the universe was among the main objectives of the movement. Rejecting religious formalities, Emerson in his "Divinity School Address" declared that "Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us....It seemed strange that the people should come to church" (138-39). Thus, Transcendentalism advocated religious experience based on intuition and an unmediated relationship with the universe

and its Creator.

To the study of philosophy, Transcendentalism added the principles of idealism. In Emerson's opinion, Transcendentalism is what is left in a person's mind after he or she empties everything that comes from traditions. Along this line of understanding, Orestes Brownson defines Transcendentalism as "the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively," and George A. Ripley defines it as "the supremacy of mind over matter" (Boller 34-35). Furthermore, Emerson, in "The Transcendentalist," provides us with the most succinct definition of Transcendentalism as an idealistic philosophy: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism."

In addition to being an emblem of intuitive religious experience and an idealistic philosophy, Transcendentalism may be described as a doctrine of reform. In the April issue of *The Dial* in 1841, Emerson wrote, "In the history of the world the doctrine of Reform had never such scope as at the present hour." Almost all members of the Transcendentalist group responded to various social reforms, e.g., women's rights, temperance, abolitionism, children's aid, prison reform, and educational reform. With regard to social reform, Emerson always believed in two parties in society: "the party of the Past and the party of the Future: the Establishment and the Movement" (Boller 100). In addition to ushering in various social reforms, Transcendentalism introduced a romantic and individualistic movement to the field of literary studies. Defying the traditional ways of looking at humans as social subjects, it re-conceptualized individuals as autonomous agents and redefined reality through what is called "an innocent eye." In short, Transcendentalism as a literary movement influenced modern American literature, e.g., the works of the Beat Generation.

From another perspective, Transcendentalism was a movement of cosmic optimism; all members of this group were profoundly optimistic. In *The Dial*, Thoreau wrote that "Surely joy is the condition of life." He further illustrated his optimism through the following words: "I believe something, and there is nothing else but that. I know that I am...I know that the enterprise is worthy. I know that things work well. I have heard no bad news." Thoreau's friend Alcott seems to be even more "affirmative about life." Thoreau said, "His [Alcott's] attitude is one of greater faith and expectation than that of any man I know." Like other members of the movement, Margaret Fuller shares the Transcendentalist group's optimism. Echoing Alcott, she says, "Evil is abstraction; Good is accomplishment." Although at times she is faced with disappointment and frustration, she never gives up her faith in "the divine soul of this visible creation, which cannot err or will not sleep, which cannot permit evil to be permanent or its aim of beauty to be eventually frustrated in the smallest particular" (Boller 143). Summing up the transcendentalists' optimistic beliefs and attitudes, Parker writes that "there was more gladness than sadness in the

world and that evil was a transient phenomenon in God's creation." In short, Transcendentalism was the first successful American movement that influenced America's religion, philosophy, literature, and attitude toward life.

3. Emerson and Indian Thought

Transcendentalism was the first American intellectual movement that showed true interests in Eastern philosophy. Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in *The Edinburgh Review* between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of *karma*. Through a discussion of Brahma, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the laws of *karma*, I explore how Emerson was deeply influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought.

3.1. The Concept of Brahma

The Indian concept of Brahma had great influence on Emerson. Brahma is the god of creation, and one of the Hindu trinity—others being Visnu, the preserver and savior of the world, and Siva, the destroyer or dissolver of the world. Emerson was so influenced by the concept of Brahma that he named one of his short poems "Brahma:"

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.
Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.
They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.
The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (665)

In this poem, Emerson describes the mystery of Brahma. It is almost impossible for humans to understand the "subtle ways" of Brahma because his character is beyond human comprehension. However, at the end of the poem, we see the light of hope because humans can find him although "strong gods" look for him "in vain." This is the human supremacy, and as Brahma assures, anybody who is the "meek lover of the good" can find him.

I shall now briefly discuss the concept of Brahma in

order to shed light on its influence on Emerson. Three concepts crucial to understanding Brahman are: *para* and *apara* Brahma, *Atman*, and *maya*. There are two forms of Brahman: *para* and *apara* Brahman, one is the formed and the other formless. In the *Upanisads*, the formed is described as unreal and the formless as real. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* states that “Truly, there are two aspects of Brahman, the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmoving and moving, the existent and that which is beyond existence” (qtd. in Herman 107). The immortal Brahma enters into the mortal Brahma. When this happens, a human—a mortal Brahma—becomes united with the immortal. In this way, humans can be united with the “formless” Brahma, which can be difficult even for the strong gods. This idea resonates with Emerson’s belief that man can achieve the majesty of God. In the “Divinity School Address” he says: The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled himself...If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (131)

Thus, Emerson believes that humans can achieve the immortality of God by good deed and justice. This is also a way of union between the formed and formless Brahma.

Another metaphysical concept of Brahma is *Atman*, which is synonymous with the Supreme Self or Spirit. It is similar to the Christian notion of Light, Christ, or Spirit, as seen in St. Paul’s words, *Galatians 2:20*, “[I]t is not I who live but Christ that liveth in me” (qtd. in Herman 110). *Atman* is the impersonal God, godlikeness, or the power of creation in the universe, which is found in all beings. The *Upanisads* mentions that “It is by seeing, hearing, reflecting, and concentrating on one’s essential self (*atman*) that the whole world is known,” and that “The *atman* is below, above, to the west, east, south, and north; the *atman* is, indeed, the whole world” (qtd. in Hamilton 30). We see this conception of *atman* in Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” in which he says that: Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul...He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, “I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.” (134)

Defying the historical Christianity, Emerson maintains that like Jesus Christ any individual can attain this “sublime” divinity because all human beings share the same Supreme Self.

In addition, Emerson constructs his own God and names Him the Over-Soul. He believes that the nature of the relationship between the Over-Soul and the individual is one-to-one. There is no place for any mediators, such as

churches or priests, in this sacred and organic relationship. He describes the Over-Soul as the Eternal One. It is a common soul in which “every man’s particular being is contained.” It is synonymous with the reality, the divine, the universal heart, the Unity, the supreme critic, the universal presence, and the Holy Spirit. In “The Over-Soul,” Emerson contemplates that “the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us and casts his dread omniscience through us over things” (217). In this essay, he emphasizes the notion of unity, and hopes that the union of the individual soul with the Over-Soul will benefit humans more than anything else.

The idea of Maya is probably most important for understanding the concept of Brahma and its influence on Emerson. In its simplest form, Maya means a magical power in which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation. A. L. Herman describes Maya as: The means by which *nirguna*, or higher, Brahma is enabled to manifest Itself as *saguna*, or lower, Brahma, is called *maya* [...] The *Upanisads* answer this all-important cosmological question about origins by indicating simply that the power or *maya* of God made all this. While all creation comes forth from the Unmanifest and Imperishable, it is the Great Lord or *Isvara* who does the actual creating, and does it with this *maya*. (108)

Maya has a double meaning because it is simultaneously a product of power of creativity and the power itself. The *Svetasvatara Upanisad* says, “Know that nature (*prakṛti*) is *maya* and that the user of *maya* is great *Isvara*. And the whole world is filled with beings that are part of him” (qtd. in Herman 109). The concept of Maya is also related to that of *atman*, where all beings of the world are seen as parts of the Supreme Being.

This concept of Maya always fascinated Emerson. He named one of his short poems “Maia:”

Illusion works impenetrable,
Weaving webs innumerable,
Her gay pictures never fail,
Crowds each on other, veil on veil,
Charmer who will be believed

By Man who thirsts to be deceived. (Emerson 432)

In this poem, Emerson dwells on the power of Maya and how it deceives us. In addition to this poem, he talks about Maya several times in his journals. For example, he responds to the idea of Maya in the following entry: The illusion that strikes me [most] as the masterpiece of Maya, is, the timidity with which we assert our moral sentiment. We are made of it, the world is built by it, Things endure as they share it, all beauty, all health, all intelligence exist by it; yet ’tis the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side” (Journals XV 243).

He fully agrees with the concept of Maya and believes that the whole world is made of it. He quotes from the *Veda*, a sacred text of the Aryans, that “the world is born of Maya” (Journals XVI 33).

However, the concepts of Maya are not always clear-cut. Maya, as it literally means magic, has puzzled many

scholars. As seen in the poem "Brahma," Brahma is "the doubter and the doubt." For this, it may seem to be a fruitless endeavor to understand the divine Maya. Likewise, Emerson is sometimes perplexed by the power of Maya. Referring to Indian mythology, he writes, "Brahma said, No, it is not thy true form, that which man sees with his organs made to seize different objects, for thou who art the asylum of knowledge. Of substance, & of quality, thou art distinct from that product of Maya which has no real existence" (Journals XVI 31). It is a dream-like effort to comprehend and embody the mystery of Maya because it has no real existence. For example, we hear Dhruva saying, "Enveloped by the divine Maya, I see distinctions, like a man who dreams. &, in presence of another being, who has meantime no real existence, I suffer from in thinking that this being, who is my brother, is my enemy" (Emerson, Journals XVI 32). The way Maya works seems to be contradictory at times because we have to unite ourselves with Maya, and at the same time, we have to remain distinct from it. As Emerson mentions, "Adore, in order to escape from existence, him who can annihilate it, & whose feet are adorable; he who unites himself, whilst remains distinct from it, to Maya, which is his energy endowed with qualities" (Journals XVI 32). Hence, Emerson is simultaneously inspired and perplexed by the concept of Maya.

In addition to Emerson's journals, we see the presence of Maya in many of his essays. For example, in "Illusions," he claims that we dwell in a kingdom of illusions. With an analogy of sick men in hospital, Emerson describes the condition of human life: "We change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (384). In his essay "Experience," Emerson writes that we cannot be sure about what we see and perceive of. We see things through filter glass—optical illusions—and we cannot know if what we see is real. If our life is a dream, there is no end to this dream. Another problem of our experience is our subjectiveness, as we are always trapped in it. The meaning and nature of everything depend on the eyes that see it. Realizing the endlessness of illusion, Emerson concludes that "Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates" (269). He understands how difficult it is to penetrate this illusion as Lord Krishna in the *Upanisads* says, "This divine maya of Mine, made of the *gunas*, is difficult to penetrate. But those who take refuge in Me alone, they penetrate this illusion" (qtd. in Herman 191). This perplexity pushes Emerson toward the following conclusion: Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. (269)

Thus, Emerson's writings illustrate that he was heavily influenced by the concept of Maya.

3.2. *The Bhagavad Gita*

Emerson was particularly struck by the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita*, "the first of books," as he once called it (Buell 178). He wrote about the *Gita* that "In England the Understanding rules & materialistic truth, the becoming, the fit, the discreet, the brave, the advantageous But they could not produce such a book as the *Bhagavat Geeta*" (Journals X, 503). The *Gita* is an ancient Sanskrit text comprising of verses embellished with many literary devices such as allegory, metaphor, and allusion. It is a record of conversations between Bhagavan or God, in the form of Krishna, and Arjuna, a human. Arjuna is a *ksatriya* warrior of the Pandava family and Krishna is his cousin and the driver of his chariot. In the battle field, Arjuna sees many of his relatives in the opposing force and, being overcome by pity, he refuses to fight. Krishna then tries to make him realize the importance of fighting. He also reminds him of his obligation to follow his *dharma* or duty and to ignore his personal feelings. Krishna sends this message to the mankind through Arjuna, as does Christ through his twelve disciples. Krishna says: "Though unborn, for the Atman [soul] is eternal, though Lord of all beings, yet using my own nature, I come into existence using my own maya." Krishna sends himself through human beings to save people from *adharma*, ruin of morality and justice. He says, "For whenever there is a decaying of *dharma*, and a rising up of *adharma*, then I send Myself forth" (Herman 146). This idea resonates with Emerson's emphasis on intuition and conscience. In the essay "Over-Soul," he writes that we, as individual souls, are part the Greater or Over-Soul. We do not have to go to church to be united with the Over-Soul because our intuition can illuminate our spiritual world like the flashes of light. Here, Emerson seems to be influenced by the teachings of the *Upanisad* and the *Gita* that nirguna [higher] Brahman, or what Emerson calls the Over-Soul, is manifested through human beings.

In a letter to William Emerson, written on May 24, 1831, Emerson wrote, "I have been reading 7 or 8 lectures of Cousin—in the first of three vols. of his philosophy. A master of history, an epic he makes of man & of the world—& excels all men in giving effect, yea, éclat to a metaphysical theory. Have you not read it? tis good reading—well worth the time—clients or no clients." (Letters I, 322). Ralph L. Rusk, the editor of *Letters*, comments that "this reading of Victor Cousin's first volume, *Cours de philosophie*, 1828, was particularly significant because it was this book which gave Emerson his first taste for the *Bhagavadgita*" (Letters I, 322). Thus, Emerson's letters along with his essays and journals indicate that the *Bhagavad Gita* was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for him.

3.3. The Laws of Karma

Another Indian philosophical concept that had tremendous influence on Emerson is *karma*. In Sanskrit, *karma* means action or work. In the *Upanisadic* and *Vedic* traditions, *karma* signifies “the results or consequences of action” and, more distinctively, “the unwanted, to-be-avoided-at-all-costs results or fruits of action.” The results of disobedience bring future suffering and pain. The *Vedas*, the *Upanisads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* all mention that disobeyers must face grave consequences. The law of *karma*, in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad IV.4.6*, mentions that “This is what happens to the man who desires. To whatever his mind is attached, the self becomes that in the next life. Achieving that end, it returns again to this world” (qtd. in Herman 131). Thus, the law of *karma* is a device to link up actions and their consequences of this life and of the next. The *Svetasvatara Upanisad* states two important doctrines about *karma*: (1) “According to its actions, the embodied self chooses repeatedly various forms in various conditions in the next life,” and (2) “according to its own qualities and acts, the embodied self chooses the kinds of forms, large and small, that it will take on” (qtd. in Herman 131). Therefore, it is the self that chooses the form it wants to be.

What is remarkable here is to note that every self gets what it wants and what it deserves. Moreover, the law of *karma* works automatically because there is no god, according to the abovementioned laws, who can give each self rewards or punishments. Franklin Edgerton comments on this automatic *karmic* law: “It is man’s relation to propriety or morality, *dharma*, which alone determines. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by “*karma*,” as an axiomatic fact. ‘By good deed one becomes what is good; by evil deed, evil’” (qtd. in Herman 132). In this sense, it seems to be clear that the *karmic* laws work according to the deeds or actions of individuals, not by the choice of any gods.

In line with this conception of the *karmic* laws, Emerson emphasizes the good deeds of people. In “Self-Reliance,” he urges his readers not to depend on good luck. He also believes that we should not take any piece of good fortune as a good omen. He concludes that: A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles (164).

Here, Emerson’s notion of self-reliance is very close to the *karmic* laws. We can choose whatever we want to be; everything is determined by our action or *karma*. We have freedom of choice and we can achieve the godly qualities that we already have within ourselves; or, we can choose to be devilish by our own *karma*.

Nevertheless, Emerson is sometimes disturbed because

he sees two sides of things—oftentimes two opposing sides. In “The Conduct of Life,” he presents a virtue of necessity, and believes that it is the art of living to suspend the oppositions and contradictions in mind. Although he recognizes the potent force of Fate, he wants his readers to believe in freewill. If both Fate and freewill are real, we have to conquer both. But, Emerson asks rhetorically: “How shall a man escape from his ancestors?” Nature is responsible in this notion of heredity because Nature, Emerson believes, brings us both disasters and delights. So, how can we accept the delights that Nature brings and avoid the disasters? There is no short answer to this question, as Emerson argues in “Compensation” that “To empty here, you must condense there.” However, one answer to this problem seems to be clear when Emerson, in “The Conduct of Life,” says that “If we must accept Fate we are not less compelled to affirm liberty.” Thus, Emerson’s concept of liberty or freewill goes hand in hand with the idea of *karma* because according to both concepts, we can re/construct our fate by our actions.

If Emerson’s thinking ever contradicts with Indian thought, it is in his essay “Compensation.” He recognizes the moral values of “the Indian mythology [which] ends in the same ethics; and it would seem impossible for any fable to be invented and get any currency which was not moral” (174). However, he is sometimes troubled because he can see not only two sides of things, but also an inherent contradiction in the concepts of good and evil. In “Compensation,” he seems to accept the existence of evil when he assures his readers that God has created everything for the best.

Nonetheless, Emerson continues to be perplexed by the riddle of two-sidedness of things. In one of his bleak statements, he writes that “There is a crack in every thing God has made” (174). He uses the term “polarity” to describe this unevenness in nature. He goes on to claim that “Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold....An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half” (168). Earlier, we have noticed Emerson’s belief that a union of our individual soul and the Over-Soul is the way of *mukti* [freedom from this material world and sufferings]. This belief resonates perfectly with the concepts of Brahma and *atman*, but his observation of dualism in “Compensation” paralyzes his faith. He says that “the same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man....Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good” (169). Because of this dualism and polarity in nature, the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul becomes difficult. In short, although much of Emerson’s thought and writing corresponds with Indian philosophy and mythology, we see a difference when he thinks that nature is full of dualism, and that this dualism hinders the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul.

4. Conclusion

Despite a little bit of contradiction, much of Emerson's belief is aligned with the Indian philosophical and religious thought. Three basic concepts of Brahma, namely, formed and formless Brahma, Atman, and Maya, exerted much influence on Emerson's writings. His essay "The Over-Soul" and poem "Brahma" illustrate the idea of formed and formless Brahma, whereas his "Divinity School Address" deals with the concept of *atman*—the impersonal god found in every human being. Maya, which denotes a magical power by which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation, is probably the most influential Indian concept for Emerson. In his poem "Maia," essays "Illusions" and "Experience," and several journal entries, Emerson talks about Maya. In addition, the *Bhagavad Gita*, an account of conversations between Krishna and Arjuna, is another great source of knowledge and inspiration for Emerson. Throughout his journals, he praises this book and claims that Europe was not able to produce a book like *Gita*. Finally, the Indian philosophical concept of *karma*—work or actions by which peoples' fate is determined—is also dominant in Emerson's writings. The laws of *karma* emphasize the actions of individuals and freedom of choice. In "The Conduct of Life" and "Self-Reliance," Emerson exploits the concept of *karma*, and urges his readers to be responsible for their own deeds. Thus, the Indian philosophical and religious concepts and teachings had a great influence on Emerson's intellectual works. By exploring and utilizing Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paved the way for his successors who continued to dig into the richness of ancient texts such as the *Upanisads* and the *Gita*. Therefore, with regard to Emerson's contribution to American scholars' growing interest in Indian thought, Dale Riepe is

convincingly right when he says that "there has been a continuous concern for Indian thought in the United States since Emerson's early years" (125).

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