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The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Thus Spake

Most obstacles in worship are not external; they are internal. They will gradually fall off one after another by taking the Master's (Sri Ramakrishna) name and by meditation. Do your duty. Don't pay attention to whether the blemishes of the mind are persisting or not.

— Sarada Devi

It is the worker who is attached to results that grumbles about the nature of the duty which has fallen to his lot; to the unattached worker all duties are equally good, and form efficient instruments with which selfishness and sensuality may be killed, and the freedom of the soul secured. We are all apt to think too highly of ourselves. Our duties are determined by our deserts to a much larger extent than we are willing to grant. Competition rouses envy, and it kills the kindliness of the heart. To the grumbler all duties are distasteful; nothing will ever satisfy him, and his whole life is doomed to prove a failure. Let us work on, doing as we go whatever happens to be our duty, and being ever ready to put our shoulders to the wheel. Then surely shall we see the Light!

— Swami Vivekananda

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Monthly Program Schedule for September 2024

11th (Wed)

Monthly Upanishad Study Class

8:30 ~ 10:00

(Japanese Only) (Zoom) (Video Uploaded Later)

14th (Sat)

Bhagavad Gita Study Class at the Indian Embassy

10:30 ~ 12:00

(Japanese Only) (Video Uploaded Later)

15th (Sun)

Monthly Retreat at Zushi

10:30 ~ 16:30

(Bilingual) (Livestreaming)(Video Uploaded Later)

Speaker: Swami Divyanathananda

17th (Tue)

Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class

14:30 ~ 16:30

(Japanese Only) (Zoom)(Video Uploaded Later)

Yoga in Daily Life

Talk by Swami Divyanathananda in June 2024 at Zushi

What most people understand by Yoga, is a set of physical exercises and breathing practices. The word 'Yoga' has become almost like a household name and has gained popularity worldwide. And now we have a world Yoga day too. But that is just one aspect of Yoga and a small fraction of all that Yoga encompasses.

What actually Yoga means is Union. Union of the individual soul with the Supreme soul- *Jivatman* and *Paramatman*. Every man wants eternal happiness, eternal life and knowledge. Whatever we do is prompted by these three desires. But in the fleeting world of the senses, we can never have fulfilment. Real fulfilment in life comes when

we know that we are separate from this body and mind. We are Atman, ever pure, ever free. This goal of freedom from the body and mind and merging our Atman with Paramatman is called Yoga, or Union. And the various paths to reach the goal are also called Yoga, which are, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga. The goal and the path – both are called Yoga.

We shall now discuss, some important steps for achieving this goal of Yoga.

Discrimination

We must have a clear idea about the transitory nature of the things around us. Our body itself is prone to decay and ultimately, death. All enjoyments and pleasures, however alluring they may be, are short lived. Most of us are not aware, that there is a being in us, which is pure, full of bliss and immortal and our aim is to get out from the clutches of the body and mind and realise our real nature. We must keep this goal in mind and for achieving this goal, we have to give up sense pleasures, however pleasant they may seem. So, we need to have constant discrimination.



In our day-to-day life also, we see that we renounce small pleasures for achieving a bigger goal. For example, a diligent student reduces sleep and time spent on entertainment like television etc. and works hard for getting good grades in his exams. A businessman toils from morning to evening on his business, dealing with customers, marketing and selling his products and if he does so year after year, he builds up a good enterprise. He sacrifices physical pleasures, entertainment, relaxation, etc. In the very same way, renunciation is necessary in the path of Yoga too, and that renunciation is the sacrifice of all physical and mental pleasures.

Along with discrimination, we need also need dispassion and practice. Practice of thinking of God each and every day. That is why, in the Bhagavad Gita we find these two terms: Abhyasa and Vairagya. Abhyasa means practice, and Vairagya means dispassion. As a bird needs two wings to fly, so the two wings for spiritual aspirant are abhyasa and vairagya. To be able to practice consistently, we should have a schedule of daily sadhana: thinking of God through prayer, Japa, etc. Along with that we should have dispassion for things which take us away from our ideal.

Cultivation of duty

The next point, which we have to keep in mind is, we should not escape from our responsibility. Cultivation of duty according to our station in life makes us stronger. It purifies our heart. If we leave our work, because it is difficult and troublesome, and consider this leaving of our duties as a part of renunciation to go towards God, then such a “renunciation” is considered as Tamasika Tyaga - renunciation as a result of delusion. According to the Bhagavad Gita, all kinds of work will have some defect. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, we find the mention of a devotee called Pratap Chandra Hazra. He had a family in his village, yet he spent his days leisurely at Dakshineswar, making a show of spiritual practices. The master never liked his attitude and would often urge him to go to his village and look after the family.

The Bhagavad Gita contains numerous suggestions as to how the our daily duties can be done as Yoga. Moreover, neither the sannyasi nor a householder is greater than one another. Both have their respective duties which they should perform in a spirit of detachment.

Notes that it is not very easy to be able to differentiate between duty and attachment. Often attachment comes in the disguise of duty. Duties may be performed

- a) Due of attachment
- b) Due to a real recognition of our duties towards others
- c) Out of devotion to God

Often the first two get mixed up. One thinker has put it this way: Duty is the penalty we pay for our attachment. The great incarnations: Buddha, Christ, Rama, Krishna had no duty. But whatever they did, it was purely out of loving service to their fellow beings. Moreover, every man has a duty to himself, and that is the union with his higher Self. Let us not forget this highest duty.

Love of God

The path of devotion, called Bhakti, is one of the paths laid down by our teachers for advancing in spiritual life, and a vast majority of spiritual aspirants follow the path of bhakti. Bhakti simply means Love of God, and it has a great propelling power for advancing in spiritual life. We have love for our body, our relatives, our house, work, our possessions, and so many other things. When this love is directed towards God, then that becomes bhakti, or devotion.

According to Bhagavad Gita, four types of devotees turn to God:

- a) The afflicted or tormented
- b) One who seeks wealth

- c) One, who seeks knowledge
- d) the knower of God

All of them are devotees, but the last type, the knower, ever communing and single minded in devotion to God is the best amongst them. In case of the first three types, they are seeking something from God.

If we divert the attention towards ourselves, we shall find that we call on God because we seek something from him. Hence, it is not pure love of God. The real devotee loves God only for the sake of loving Him. For him, all desires have been annihilated. But, as we go on practicing spiritual practices and dispassion, a new eye will develop and gradually our mind will become purer and purer, and we shall be able to attain sincere and selfless love of God.

For developing devotion to God, cultivation of a definite attitude with our chosen ideal is a great aid. Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly has advised us to build up a personal relationship with him as of a father, or mother, or friend. Then the path becomes easier. The farther He is, the more he seems to be unapproachable. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, we find the mention of Sikh devotees, who when asked about their idea of God, they said, he is kind. But Sri Ramakrishna's advice to them was, if he has created us, then there is no wonder that he should be kind. What kindness is there for parents in bringing up their own children? So, we should rather feel free to demand from him. Let us approach Him as a child approaches his father or mother.

Faith in ourselves

Faith in ourselves helps us move Godward. God is the source of all strength and power. We, being the children of God also should gather strength from within. Swami Vivekananda said, if you think yourself strong, strong you will be, if you think yourself weak, weak you will be. A positive attitude about our own self is absolutely needed to progress in spiritual life. Only a strong person can face temptations. Actually, the life of Yoga calls for lot of struggles. Although we seem to be serious on our goal, but often we are not ready to pay the price needed for this journey. One should be ready to face the ups and down in life of Yoga. That's why, strength and faith in oneself is absolutely essential. Here, Swamiji's own experience in Varanasi is worth mentioning. It happened while he was passing by the Durga Temple at Varanasi. Suddenly a bunch of monkeys started to chase him. Swamiji started running and they also ran after him. One monk saw this and cried out, 'Face the brutes!'. At once, Swamiji turned around and stood still in front of the monkeys, and they stopped chasing him. Swamiji, mentioning this incident, later remarked, when you are confronted with the enemies from within yourself, rather than trying to run away from them, you should face them bravely.

SV Public Celebrations: Swamiji's Words of Strength

by Leonardo Alvarez, doctoral student at Sophia University, on 1st June 2024
At the Embassy of India at Tokyo

Dear organizers, our moderator Mr. Gupta, guest speakers and esteemed audience. I shall be briefly talking on Swami Vivekananda's message on strength, alongside with some personal comments.

Swami Vivekananda, whom I shall address reverently as Swamiji, was a very unique monk, who would not compromise anything before Truth, for whom Truth was but a synonym of strength. He often said that: *"Strength is Life, weakness is Death. The best guide in life is strength. In religion, as in all other matters, discard everything that weakens you, have nothing to do with it."* Every time we sin, he affirms, it is due to weakness. Should then we go on repeating that we are sinners? No, Swamiji said: *"The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness but thinking of strength. Teach men of the strength that is already in them."* Why? Because Vedanta proclaims that our true nature is Sat-Chit-Ananda, Existence, Consciousness, Bliss Absolute. But we require tremendous strength to realize this fact, hence Sri Krishna's encouraging words: *"Yield not to unmanliness, Oh friend, it does not befit thee".*

When we wish to realize the Truth, our mind, our family and friends, and even the whole of society may turn against us – should we then cower before them and go along with the current, live and die a mediocre life? No – let us stand up and fight if we must, against the whole universe. The supreme goal requires supreme sacrifice. Only when we have such a strong determination, will we succeed.



Now the fiercest fight is against our own minds. We have to fight countless lives of samskaras, inherited tendencies of animal impulses, of bad habits, of ignorance and hypnotism. But Swamiji is very optimistic, saying we can replace all negative habits or samskaras, with new, positive ones, and thus create a better character. As a student of academic Western psychology, and also of Indian psychology, I can venture to share some ideas here. Until recently, Western Psychology had said that a man's character was unchangeable since birth, because it depended entirely on biological factors – hence, no impact from the environment, and no hope for change through self-effort. Basically, if we are born with the wrong genes, we are doomed. This is perhaps,

questionable. There is a new, emerging science, called “*epigenetics*,” that confirms exactly what Swamiji says – given the proper conditions, we can change the manifestation of our genes, and as a consequence, of our brains, our minds and our whole being.

The Bible says that man was “*made in the image of God*”. The science of Yoga, states that man can become fully divine. Yoga Philosophy explains that the divine potential exists there, within us, it is part of our DNA, our birthright. “*Lo and behold, the kingdom of heaven is within you!*” We need to remove the obstacles that prevent the manifestation of that divinity. What are these obstacles? Greed, anger, lust, and so forth. To remove them, we need to make consistent efforts, with meditation and psychic control through Raja Yoga, discrimination between the eternal and the non-eternal through Jnana Yoga, selfless work for humanity and God through Karma Yoga, and devotion to God through Bhakti Yoga.

We know that there are three states of mind (triguna) according to the Samkhya psychology of India: Tamas or dullness, ignorance and destruction; Rajas or excessive activity, attachment, passion, anxiety and suffering; and Sattva, or calmness, purity, selflessness, happiness and stability. If we observe our mind, we find that it is mostly Tamasic and Rajasic, either negative or restless. Often times these negative tendencies are operating strongly without our awareness, and we are simply swept away by them – in spite of our best intentions. Why do we fail to control these impulses? It is due to weakness. The wave comes and we have no strength to stop it. So, we need to increase our strength. Let us remember that a weak body engenders a weak mind and vice versa. Hence, strength of body and mind should go in parallel. “*We want muscles of iron and nerves of steel*”. Swamiji, often referred to the might and power of Rajas manifest in Hanuman, the great hero, who was also humble and a perfect brahmachari or celibate. With such power, we can check Tamas, and proceed to gain the spiritual, all-round strength of Sattva, of intense calmness, that will finally help us go beyond these three gunas and achieve the goal of life, which is freedom, bliss and fearlessness.

By which process exactly, is this power obtained? We find in Swamiji’s Raja Yoga, that the body-mind complex, known as the Chitta, obtains energy from food, the gross part of which is used to move the body, and the subtler part goes into the mind. The mind in form of thoughts, through concentration, can change into will force, and will force into the nerve currents which manifest in a motion similar to electricity. When these electric nerve currents are properly directed and intensified through moral practices and selflessness, they engender outer results, such as great deeds and serving others unselfishly, and in inner results, such as purifying our minds. Whenever you see great deeds and men and women of pristine purity, it is the manifestation of this power. This we obtain, not by following the whims of our mind, but by controlling them and holding the mind in check. It is much greater manifestation of power to control the horses than to let them run wild. Western Psychologists say “do not restrain the mind, otherwise the desires will be repressed, you will develop a neurosis complex and suffer,”

but we wonder if this is truly so. By practicing self-restraint, impulses can be checked and sublimated, creating what is known in Indian psychology as *Ojas*, a special power of vitality, that can be channeled to work with great joy, energy, enthusiasm and precision. With this *Ojas*, our nerves become finely tuned and we can control our bodies and minds more easily.

The Samkhya Psychology of India states that the mind is subtle matter, and it follows that it operates in a similar way to gross matter. This whole universe is a giant wave of vibration, and the faster or more intense the vibration, the more power it manifests. Swamiji mentioned in his Raja Yoga that if you could move a spiderweb at an almost infinite velocity, it would be as strong as an iron chain and cut through an oak tree. If you accelerate sound waves, for instance, they become light, and if you intensify the frequency of light photons and make them flow in the same direction, this becomes a laser that can cut through steel. Similarly, through intense concentration and self-control, and not through dissipation, the unlimited powers of the mind are gradually manifested. Such a strong mind, then, can be powerful in all fields of life and help us concentrate on God or the Ultimate Reality.

When applied to the context of our modern society, the large number of distractions that surround us in the form of computers, mobiles, tablets, internet, among others, have taken a toll on our ability to concentrate. Studies have found that people's attention have drastically dropped, with some, like a Microsoft Study from 2015, stating that our concentration span is now shorter than that of a goldfish, which is less than 8 seconds! Psychological research has also shown that a distracted mind is essentially an unhappy mind. With such a mind how can we succeed in life? There will be no success in spiritual life, work life, with our families nor in our human relationships. Hence proper concentration of the mind is of paramount importance.

Ideally, by sheer use of will force, we should be able to control the mind and make it concentrate perfectly. This, however, is almost impossible in the beginning for many of us. When we try to concentrate only on a holy image for a few minutes, we will find that perhaps within seconds, we are thinking of something else, and within minutes we are, perhaps, dozing off. To be practical, we should start with small, achievable steps, such as waking up early in the morning and meditating for 15 to 25 minutes without fail, or not yielding to the whims of the mind, practicing self-restraint with small impulses, and keeping a regular exercise routine.

We see then, the necessity to lead a disciplined lifestyle. Swamiji advocated for it and created a routine for the monastic inmates when he founded the Belur Math. We also find that all great men and women in history have led disciplined lifestyles. It consists in following an ideal routine from morning to night, beginning with sleeping early and waking up early, with proper time for exercise, meditation, work, study and leisure, as well as the cultivation of proper attitudes, such as focusing deeply and doing all work perfectly, practicing restraint and unity in word, speech and deed, controlling lust,

anger and greed, always telling the truth and being altruistic through selfless work. These tally with Patanjali's psychological system, where we find the rules of Yama and Niyama, moral guidelines of self-restraint and practices that increase the stability of mind, which enable us to proceed to the following steps of meditation in a safe way and eventually reach Samadhi.

As logical and romantic as it may seem, this is a hard journey of a thousand leagues. Swamiji's words of encouragement are like tonics that help us keep our spirits high and persevere until the end. I would like to finish then, with two quotations from Swamiji and short comments on them:

- (1) Have first faith in yourself then in God. The history of the world is the history of a few men who had faith in themselves. That faith calls out the divinity within. You can do anything. *—If we read the history of "self-made men," like Abraham Lincoln or Mahatma Gandhi, we see that they made themselves great through infinite faith in themselves and relentless self-effort.*
- (2) You only fail when you do not strive sufficiently to manifest infinite power. To succeed, you must have tremendous perseverance, tremendous will. "I will drink the ocean", says, the persevering soul; "at my will mountains will crumble up."— *Hence the importance of a regulated lifestyle, self-restraint and strong determination, so that we may have enough mental and physical stamina to make herculean efforts to finish this long race. Let us then, Arise and awake and stop not till the goal is reached!*

• Thought of the Month •

Why Make an Effort?

(from a discussion with Jiddu Krishnamurti)

Questioner: You have said that it is effort that destroys us, that life becomes a series of battles; and the only happy man is one who is not caught up in effort. But can you do any work in the world without some effort?

Krishnamurti: Why not, Sir? What is effort? It is a contradiction of energies, isn't it? One energy opposing another energy.

Questioner: Couldn't it be a steadfast drive in one direction?

Krishnamurti: Then, if there is one drive, a pursuit, where is the contradiction in that? There is no wastage of energy. There's no conflict. If I want to go out for a walk, I go out for a walk. But if I have to go out for a walk, and yet I have to do something else, then the contradiction begins, then conflict, then effort. So, that's why, to understand effort, one has to find out how contradictory we are.

SV Public Celebrations: Swamiji on Weakness and Strength

by Dr. Yasuyuki Hirano, Research Fellow at a Public Research Institute, on 1st June 2024
At the Embassy of India at Tokyo

I am a mechanical engineering researcher at a public research institute. Currently, I am involved in fine processing of 1/1000mm or less, and am involved in joint development with private companies. Also, since I was a student, I have been supporting eco-power generation at temples in Nepal. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to study Hindu philosophy until 2018. I attended a Vedanta Society retreat in 2018 and learned about Swami Vivekananda and his words for the first time, and it really stuck with me. Since then, I have often thought of those words. These words are: **“The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength.”**

After that, Swami Medhasanandaji advised me to read a book called Jnana Yoga. Jnana Yoga was also very interesting. This time, upon receiving a request for this presentation, I re-read Jnana Yoga and at the same time researched where Swami Vivekananda's words came from. When I looked at the source of “Arise Awake” where this phrase was written, I found that it was Jnana Yoga. Jnana Yoga is primarily a record written by an audience member of the lectures he gave in London in 1896, and was published as a book in 1899, during his lifetime. This phrase about "weakness and strength" is mentioned in the last part of the lecture series, Chapter 10 Freedom of the Soul.

What was the time like in 1896, about 130 years ago? The diesel engine was patented in 1893, and its principle still supports large cargo transportation. In 1895, video shooting and projection equipment was put into practical use. It was a time when science was being applied in earnest to society. At the same time, Britain was in the midst of the Great Depression of 1873–1896. There may have been greater changes in society than there are today, and there may have been more people suffering. Regarding



“weakness and strength,” Jnana Yoga does not use the same words as “Arise Awake” but the same content is described in detail. Below are excerpts from the relevant passages of Jnana Yoga.

The ideal is always very hard. Would it be any help for us, because we cannot realise the truth immediately, to go into darkness and yield to weakness and superstition? I have objections to every form of teaching which inculcates weakness.

I know it is truth alone that gives strength. I know that truth alone gives life, and nothing but going towards reality will make us strong, and none will reach truth until he is strong. Every system, therefore, which weakens the mind, makes one superstitious, makes one mope, makes one desire all sorts of wild impossibilities, mysteries, and superstitions, I do not like, because its effect is dangerous.

Strength is the medicine for the world's disease. *Strength is the medicine which the poor must have when tyrannised over by the rich.*

“I am the Blissful One. I am not bound either by virtue or vice, by happiness or misery.” This, says the Vedanta, is the only prayer that we should have. This is the only way to reach the goal, to tell ourselves, and to tell everybody else, that we are divine. And as we go on repeating this, strength comes.

This lecture in London used elements of the dualism of strength and weakness, and was aimed at people of the modern era, where technology has advanced; but the core of the message is monism, which is universal. Technology has developed by dividing things into smaller parts and comparing the size and superiority of numbers. Modern society, which is based on technology, may be said to be built on dualism. I think we often have a comparative dualistic mindset. This world of dualism can be exhausting. Being in technology, I cannot avoid it, and everyone may be so. In addition, separate from science and society, sadness and suffering suddenly come into our lives.

Can we get his universal idea? He says, “You never lost it.” I think everyone has experienced monism. I don't think there was any comparison when you were looking at the ocean or mountains or listening to your favorite music. I would like to ask you one question here. “So what exactly is weakness?” Swami Vivekananda says there is no need to think, but my answer is: There is no such thing as weakness for us. If you feel weakness, it is an illusion. The only people that exist in this world are us as the Blissful Ones. We have strength. Why not break free from dualism once in a while and think about monism? You will feel lighter and more positive. Especially when you feel weak, try taking this special medicine.

Through Jnana Yoga, I was able to see the Himalayas of monism. There are other climbing routes in the Himalayas other than Jnana Yoga. The first is Raja Yoga, which focuses on deep meditation. The second is Bhakti Yoga, which directs and prioritizes our affection toward God, and expects nothing in return. The third is Karma Yoga, which believes that each of us has a job, an occupation, or a role given to us by God, and asks us to put our best into any task. Although I have only seen the Himalayas from a distance, I feel comforted by the reality of the Himalayas, which is independent of distance and time.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Swami Vivekananda for giving me this opportunity to think about monism with all of you.

Photographs from the Annual Outdoor Retreat

At Zentsuji From 5th~7th July 2024

(this is the first set; more will be published in succeeding newsletters)







• Story to Remember •

Living Presence of God

DESPAISED OF GETTING the coveted fruit of Sadhana, Puran Chand approached his Guru.

"Useless! Six months of worship of the idol of Narayana has produced no effect at all. Kindly suggest a more powerful Mantra and more powerful Deity." The Guru had initiated Puran Chand into the Narayana Mantra and given him a small, beautiful idol of Lord Narayana for worship. Puran was regular in the worship, ceaseless in his Japa. God knows why, but there was no sign of the idol blessing him.

The Guru smiled at Puran. "Well son, take this idol of Lord Siva. I will presently initiate you into the Siva Mantra-the holy Panchakshara. Worship Lord Siva with faith and devotion. He is considered Bholenath. He is easily propitiable. He will bless you soon." Puran Chand was overjoyed. The next six months saw Puran Chand immersed in Japa and worship of Lord Siva. The idol of Narayana went on the dusty shelf above the altar in his worship room.

"No use in this either. Not a trace of effect. My Lord, please do not test me. Kindly give me initiation into the Mantra and the idol of that Deity who will soon bless me," Puran Chand pleaded with his Guru. The Guru smiled again. The time for enlightenment had arrived, yet he felt that the disciple will learn for himself by experience.

"Good, my son. In this age, Mother Kali is most gracious. Worship this image of Hers. Repeat the Navarna Mantra. You will attain Her Grace very soon indeed." This time Puran Chand had no misgiving whatsoever, he had full faith. Kali worship commenced. Siva joined company with Lord Narayana on the shelf. With great devotion and feeling, Puran was waving incense before the image of Mother Kali. The fumes rose up. He watched. They reached the shelf too. He was enraged. He laid the incense down and got up.

"Well, what business has this Lord Siva, who refused to be propitiated and who refused to bless me, to inhale this incense? I am worshipping Mother Kali now. I will not allow this fragrant incense to enter Siva's nostrils. I will plug them with cotton." Puran set about the task. He took the rusting idol of Siva in his hands and began inserting cotton into its nostrils!

Lo! The idol disappeared. In front of him stood the Lord, smiling in all His mercy and compassion. Puran was on his knees.

"Ask for any boon, Puran. I am greatly pleased with your devotion."

"My Lord, first tell me. I am perplexed. You did not deign to bless me when I devoutly worshipped you, when I repeated the Panchakshara Mantra for six months. But you suddenly chose to reveal yourself to me when I had discarded your image and given up your worship. What is this mystery?"

"My child, there is nothing mysterious in this. How could I reveal Myself when you treated Me as a mere image, as a mere piece of metal, to be worshipped and discarded at your sweet will or whim? But when you treated the idol as a living Presence, when you began to plug the nostrils with cotton so that the incense may not enter those nostrils, and thus revealed that you recognised my living Presence in that idol, I could no more withhold Myself from you."

Speechless and enlightened, Puran bowed to Lord Siva and was immersed in His love. He could ask for no boon. In His love he found everything.

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