CHAPTER - III

Vivekananda as the Exponent of Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara

When we go through lectures, discourses and philosophical writings of Swami Vivekananda we find that Vivekananda propounded his philosophy by assimilating the great intellect of Śaṅkara and the universal heart of Buddha. This combined legacy of the two great architects of thought and culture - Buddha and Śaṅkara has influenced the philosophical writings of Swamiji to a great extent. In Śaṅkarachārya he saw tremendous intellectual power throwing the searching light of reason upon everything. That is why, he considered Śaṅkara's exposition of Vedānta scientific. In Buddha on the other hand, he visualised the great universal heart and infinite patience making religion practical and bringing it to everybody's door.

We can very well visualise the influence of these two great thinkers of ancient India in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy. Vivekananda's philosophy has its two subdivisions - one of them is emphasis on Jñāna and the other may be said to
be emphasis on Karma. The two sub-divisions taken together constitute the entire philosophy of Vivekananda. The philosophy of Vivekananda that has emerged from the emphasis on Jñāna, is similar as Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara.

It will not be irrelevant to state that Vivekananda got the truth of Advaita Vedānta from his Guru Sri Ramakrishna, the Divine Personality, realised the mystery of the two worlds - phenomenon and noumenon - mundane and extra-mundane or spiritual through his Divine inspiration and deep meditation. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "It is a remarkable phenomenon that in Sri Ramakrishna, there has been an assemblage of ideas deeper than the sea and vaster than the skies". I But Vivekananda wanted some sort of theoretical justification for the acceptance of the realised truth of Sri Ramakrishna and he found in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta the basic truth of Sri Ramakrishna's vision and thought amply corroborated. Sri Ramakrishna realised the V-edāntic truth that the Divine is in the self and the self is in the Divine and handed down this truth to his favourite disciple Swami Vivekananda. The disciple got the sole inspiration of illumination from the Master and gave a practical shape to Vedānta. According to Vivekananda, the different expressions

1 Quoted from Golden Jubilee Soubenir (1923-73): Ramakrishna Mission and Ashrama, Bombay, p.35.
of the Vedānta are not antagonistic to one another but stages in the final spiritual fulfilment. The philosophical positions of Dvaita, Visistadvaita and Advaita were to him not absolute systems but stages in spiritual growth. To quote Swamiji, "In these three systems we find the gradual working up of the human mind towards higher and higher ideals, till everything is merged in that wonderful unity which is reached in the Advaita system". By solid reasoning Śaṅkara extracted from the Vedas the truths of the Vedānta and on them built up the wonderful system of jñāna that is preached through his commentaries. He unified all the conflicting descriptions of Brahman and showed that there is only one infinite Reality.

Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara is popularly known as Māyā-Vada. In Jñāna-Kanda Swamiji has expounded and exemplified the Māyā-Veda of Śaṅkara. In fact, the may be said to be the exponent of Māyā-Vada of Śaṅkara.

Śaṅkara points out that there is only one Reality and that Reality is Brahman. But due to influence of māyā, the world appears to be different from Brahman. Swami Vivekananda in his Jñāna Kanda has beautifully summed up the fundamental need of the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara in the following lines -

"There is but One - The Free - the Knower-Self!"
Without a name, without a form or stain
In Him is Māyā, dreaming all this dream"  

In these expressions we find three main fundamental essences of Advaita Vedānta. There is only one Reality and that Reality is Brahman or Ātman. Its only introduction is - it is without a name, a form or stain. Would of multiplicity which appears to us is Māyā. In truth they donot exist. But as long as we are circumspect by this material existence we are bound to see these visions. Root cause of these visions is in Brahman which is one and the only Reality. In Swamiji's words, "There is, therefore, but one Ātman, One Self, eternally pure, eternally perfect, unchangeable, unchanged; it has never changed; and all these various changes in the universe are but appearances in that one Self ............ Upon it name and form have painted all these dreams; it is the form that makes the wave different from the sea ...... The existence of the wave was entirely dependent upon the existence of the sea, but the existence of the sea was not at all dependent upon the existence of the wave. The form remains so long as the wave remains, but as soon as the wave leaves it, it vanishes, it cannot remain. This name and form is the outcome of what is

3 Swami Vivekananda: Jñāna Yoga, p.ix. (Thirteenth Impression).
called Māyā. It is this Māyā that is making individuals, making one appear different from another. Yet it has no existence. Māyā cannot be said to exist. Form cannot be said to exist, because it depends upon the existence of another thing. It cannot be said as not to exist, seeing that it makes all this difference. According to Advaita philosophy, then, this Māyā or ignorance - or name and form, or, as it has been called in Europe, "time, space, and causality"⁴ - is out of this one Infinite Existence showing us the manifoldness of the universe; in substance, this universe is one. So long as any one thinks that there are two ultimate realities, he is mistaken. When he has come to know that there is but one, he is right. This is what is being proved to us everyday, on the physical plane, on the mental plane, and also on the spiritual plane.''⁴

But though Vivekanandahas expounded and exemplified the Māyā-Vada of Śaṅkara, he has not subscribed to the Advaita view of Māyā without any modification. He opines that a lack of proper understanding of the deeper meaning of māyā as also an indiscriminate use of the doctrine has done a lot of harm. To him, (Vivekananda), Māyā is not a theory for the explanation of the world. It is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis

of our being is contradiction. In other words, the world in which we live, move and have one being is full of contradictions. The worda Māyā, according to Vivekananda refers to this contradictory nature of the world. Since contradiction constitutes the very backbone of this world, we are incapable of giving any satisfactory and rational explanation of it. The world is there, it is visible to us, it is charming and inspiring; but at the same time it is also a valley of tears, an abode of death and dejection. How can such a puzzling thing be rationally explained? Vivekananda gives us innumerable number of instances in order to show the contradictory nature of the world. Let us enumerate some of them. It seems that man can know everything, if he only wants to know; but before he has gone a few steps, he finds adamantine wall which he cannot pass. All his work is in a circle, and we cannot go beyond that circle. The problems which are nearest and dearest to him are impelling him on and calling, day and night, for a solution, but he cannot solve them, because he cannot go beyond his intellect. We want to know everything but we cannot know everything because of the limitations of our intellect. Thus intellect though it inspires us to know infinite truth, infinite intelligence, and infinite love, it also obstructs us to go beyond its own spheres. This limitation of the power of intellect is a fact which we cannot deny. Thus we find that intellect creates a confusing state of affairs which has been described
cryptically as Māyā. Vivekananda goes on to say, "Then, there is the tremendous fact of death. The whole world is going towards death; everything dies. All our progress, our vanities, our reforms, our luxuries, our wealth, our knowledge have that one end - death. That is all that is certain. Cities come and go, empires rise and fall, planets break into pieces and crumble into dust, to be blown about by the atmospheres of other planets. Thus it has been going on from time without beginning. Death is the end of everything. Death is the end of life, of beauty, of wealth, of power, of virtue too. Saints die and sinners die, Kings die and beggars die. They are all going to death, and yet this tremendous clinging on to life exists. Somehow, we donot know why, we cling to life; we cannot give it up. And this is Māyā ............. Death is stalking day and night over this earth of ours, but at the same time we think we shall live eternally. A question was once asked of King Yudhishthira, 'What is the most wounderful thing on this earth?' And the King replied, 'Everyday people are dying around us, and yet men think they will never die'. And this is Māyā⁵. Throughout our life we find people dying but the desire to live for ever remains within our heart of hearts. In this connection we bear in mind Kavi Guru Rabindranath Tagore's famous poem - 'Marite Chahina Ami Sundar Bhubane.

Manaver Majhe Ami Bachibare Chai - I donot like to die leaving this beautiful universe. I want to live within living human heings'. The desire to live is so deep-rooted in men that they cannot think of the impending evil of death. Schopenhauer has rightly pointed out, that even a dying man has the desire to live on. Such a desire is due to Māyā. We cannot understand rationally how in the midst of death, non-ernity and destruction one can cling to life with so much enthusiasm, attachment and blind emotion. Man sees the fate of everything in the world and yet he never thinks of the perishable nature of his own existence. It is as if a man is denying death even when he is in the grip of death. If this wonderful delusion is not Māyā, then what else can it be? And we find that very often we cannot do good to others without taking recourse to the medium of evil. In our day-to-day life we experience that animals are living upon plants, men upon animals, and stronger upon the weaker sections but we are not in a position to find a solution for the evils of life. This is going on everywhere and this is Māyā. Very often we are familiar with the saying that in the long run everything will be good. But we fail to

understand why should good come out of evil? Why should it not come out of good? But we cannot suggest any solution of this problem and this is Mâyā. To quote Vivekananda, "animals are living upon plants, men upon animals, and, worst of all, upon one another, the strong upon the weak. This is going on everywhere. And this is Mâyā. What solution do we find for this? We hear everyday many explanations, and are told that in the long run all will be good. Taking it for granted that this is possible, why should there be this diabolical way of doing good? Why cannot good be done through good, instead of through these diabolical methods? The descendants of human beings of today will be happy; but why must there be all this suffering now? There is no solution. This is Mâyā." Again in our everyday experience we find that the more we hanker after pleasure, the less pleasure we get in return. We fail to realise that pleasure is mingled with pain. As Sidgwick has rightly pointed out that if we ask ourselves whether we are happy, we cease to be so. A direct pursuit of pleasure is suicidal. Inspite of Sidgwick's warning, we run after pleasures. We fail to realise that - "Nothing begins and nothing ends,
That is not paid with mean;
For we are born in others' pain
And perish in our own" 8

8 Francis Thompson: Daisy.
we still go on seeking pleasures. And this is Māyā. In Vivekananda's words, "As we increase our power to be happy, we also increase our power to suffer, and sometimes I am inclined to think that if we increase our power to become happy in arithmetical progression, we shall increase, on the other hand, our power to become miserable in geometrical progression. We who are progressing know that the more we progress, the more avenues are opened to pain as well as to pleasure: And this is Māyā ............ There will never be a perfectly good or bad world, because the very idea is a contradiction in terms. The great secret revealed by this analysis is that good and bad are not two cut-and-dried, separate existences. There is not one thing in this world of ours which you can label as good and good alone, and there is not one thing in the universe which you can label as bad and bad alone. The very same phenomenon which is appearing to be good now, may appear to be bad tomorrow. The same thing which is producing misery in one, may produce happiness in another. The fire that burns the child, may cook a good meal for a starving man. The same nerves that carry the sensations of misery carry also the sensations of happiness. The only way to stop evil, therefore is to stop good also; there is no other way. To stop death, we shall have to stop life also. Life without death and happiness without misery are contradictions, and neither can be found alone, because each of
them is but a different manifestation of the same thing" 9 This
is Māyā. Again, "Each one of us wants to keep this body for
an indefinite time, thinking we shall be very happy, but there
will come a time when we shall laugh at this idea. Now, if
such be the truth, we are in a state of hopeless contradiction
- neither existence nor non-existence, neither misery nor
happiness, but a mixture of them" 10. Vivekananda is very clear
in his view that Māyā is an insoluble riddle of the universe.
The entire world is engulfed by Māyā. We cannot go beyond it
nor can we survive without it. The entire universe is pervaded
by Māyā.

Swamiji beautifully sums up entire picture of Māyā
in the following lines:

"Māyā of the Vedānta, in its last developed form is
neither Idealism nor Realism, nor is it a theory. It is simple
statement of facts - what we are and what we see around us" 11.
He continues to say, "Maya is not a theory for the explanation
of the world, it is simply a statement of facts as they exist,
that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that every­
where we have to move through this tremendous contradiction,

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that wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and whenever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, death must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice versa. Nor can this state of things be remedied. We may verily imagine that there will be a place where there will be only good and no evil, where we shall only smile and never weep. This is impossible in the very nature of things; for the conditions will remain the same. Wherever there is the power of producing a smile in us, there lurks the power of producing tears. Wherever there is the power of producing happiness, there lurks somewhere the power of making us miserable. This eternal play of light and darkness - indiscriminate, indistinguishable, inseparable - is always there. A fact, yet at the same time not a fact; awake and at the same time asleep. This is a statement of facts, and this is what is called Mâyā. We are born in this Mâyā, we live in it, we think in it, we dream in it. We are philosophers in it, we are spiritual men in it, nay, we are devils in this Mâyā, and we are gods in this Mâyā. Stretch your ideas as far as you can make them higher and higher, call them infinite or by any other name you please, even these ideas are within this Mâyā. It cannot be otherwise, and the whole of human knowledge is a generalisation of this Mâyā.

trying to know it as it appears to be. This is the work of
Nama-Rapa-name and form. Everything that has form, everything
that calls up an idea in your mind, is within Māyā; for every­
thing that is bound by the laws of time, space and consaotion
is within Māyā."¹³. In other words, Swamiji wants us to realise
that all that we perceive in and around us is what is called
Māyā.

But if we can destroy the spell of Māyā and can know
that the world is no other than Brahman, the image of the world
will alter immediately. At that time we shall realise that
Brahman is manifested in the world which is the expression
of sat, cit and añandā. The Īśā Upaniṣad remarks: He who knows
the truth of the Infinite and that of the Finite both united
together, crosses death by the help of avidyā and by the help
of the Vidya reaches immortality. Swamiji says, "Then, Māyā
instead of being a horrible, hopeless dream as it is now, will
become beautiful and this earth, instead of being a prison-
house, will become our playground; and even dangers and diff­
culties, even all sufferings, will become deified and show
us their real nature, will show us that behind everything,
as the substance of everything, He is standing, and that He
is the one real Self."¹⁴

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Vivekananda's eagerness to realise reality behind Māyā has been beautifully expressed in the following passages -

"This mind, so deluded, so weak, so easily led, even this mind can be strong and may catch a glimpse of that knowledge, that Oneness, which saves us from dying again and again. As rain falling upon a mountain flows in various streams down the sides of the mountain, so all the energies which you see here are from that one Unit. It has become manifold falling upon Māyā. Donot run after the manifold; go towards the One".

"He is in all that moves; He is in all that is pure; He fills the universe; He is in the sacrifice; He is the guest in the house; He is in man, in water, in animals, in truth; He is the Great One. As fire coming into this world is manifesting itself in various forms, even so, that one Soul of the universe is manifesting Himself in all these various forms. As air coming into this universe manifests itself in various forms, even so, the One Soul of all Souls, of all beings, is manifesting Himself in all forms".15

It is no exaggeration to say that Swamiji understood the Advanta philosophy of Śaṅkara better than any one else in the world and he did not hesitate to expressing the same in

a very clear and lucid language. Swamiji writes, "According to the Advaita philosophy, there is only one thing real in the universe, which it calls Brahman; everything else is unreal, manifested and manufactured out of Brahman by the power of Māyā. To reach back to that Brahman is our goal. We are, each one of us, that Brahman, that Reality, plus this Māyā. If we can get rid of this Māyā or ignorance, then we become what we really are. According to this philosophy, each man consists of three parts - the body, the internal organ or the mind, and behind that, what is called Ātman, the Self. The body is the external coating and the mind is the internal coating of the Ātman which is the real perceiver, the real enjoyer, the being in the body who is working the body by means of the internal organ or the mind."16

"The soul (or self) is one with Freedom, and the soul is one with Existence, and the soul is one with knowledge. The Sat-Cit-Ānanda - Existence - Knowledge - Bliss Absolute - is the nature, the birthright of the Soul, and all the manifestations that we see are Its expressions, dimly or brightly manifesting Itself. Even death is but a manifestation of that Real Existence. Birth and death, life and decay, degeneration and regeneration - are all manifestations of that Oneness.

So, Knowledge, however it manifests itself, either as ignorance or as learning, is but the manifestation of that same Chit, the essence of Knowledge; the difference is only in degree, and not in kind. The difference in Knowledge between the lowest worm that crawls under our feet and the highest genius that the world may produce is only one of degree, and not of Kind. The Vedāntin thinker boldly says that the enjoyments in this life, even the most degraded joys, are but manifestations of that One Divine Bliss, the Essence of the Soul."17

We can very well visualise two movements, a negative and a positive in Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic thought. Swamiji accepted in toto the description of Brahman given by Śaṅkara. It is the traditional approach to Brahman by the path of negation (neti neti). But in contradistinction to it Vivekananda also laid down some positive approaches to Brahman. In the process he repudiated the negative aspects of Brahman with his versatile wisdom putting forth new argument and introspection. To understand Brahman, Swamiji goes on to say that we have to go through the negation; and then the positive side will begin. We have to give up ignorance and all that is false; and then truth will begin to reveal itself to us. When we have grasped the truth, things which we gave up at first will take

new shape and form, will appear to us in a new light and become deified. In other words, it will assume new dimension, affirmation and reality. In Swami Vivekananda's philosophy, the world is not totally negated in Brahman. It is not, as in Śankara's Advaita it is, that Brahman alone is real and the world is illusory (Brahman satyam, jagamitha) but that in a sense the world is also real. This will be clear when we go through the entire philosophy of Vivekananda.

It has already been stated that the two aspects of Swamiji's philosophy, namely emphasis on Jñāna and emphasis on Karma taken together constitute the entire philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. The basic trend of Vivekananda's philosophy that has emerged from Jñāna Kanda is similar to Advaita Vedānta of Śankara. On the other hand, in the second part, that is Karma Kanda, we find that there is altogether a different approach. Here we note a separate tone of Vivekananda. To a māyā-vadi Sannyasi we need not expect any feeling for the human race who are subjected to pains and sufferings. But in Swamiji's philosophy we find that the bright sun of intellectuality of Śankara has combined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful, infinite heart of love and mercy. It is really a wonder to see that in Vivekananda's philosophy these two conflicting ideas of Śankara and Buddha meet and shake hands. The question naturally arises, how is it that the contradictories of the two great
thinkers of ancient India got resolved in Vivekananda? We may say in reply that Swamiji wanted to satisfy the demands of both head and heart. It is because of this fact that he could not but show deep feeling for the entire human race whom he as an exponent of Śāṅkara was termed as Māyā. The real philosophy of Vivekananda has emerged as a result of the synthesis of Māyā-Vāda of Śāṅkara and the great humanism of Buddha. Of course Vivekananda did not agree with Buddha on all points. Inspite of his divergence with Buddha he could not but show regard for Buddha's deep universal love for all living beings. He says, "I donot endorse all his philosophy. I want a good deal of metaphysics, for myself. I entirely differ in many respects, but, because I differ, is that any reason why I should not see the beauty of the man?" 18. He was born for the good of men. Throughout his life he preached the good of all living beings including men and animals with a heart as wide as the ocean. In a general way, Swamiji laid down the Karma-Kanda of Buddha as a process of Nirvāṇa.

It would not be out of place to mention there that like Vivekananda Kant also could not but accept what his intellectuality refused to accept. His tremendous intellectual power has not allowed him to probe the existence of God. But

he thereby could not deny the existence of God. In the critique of Practical Reason he pointed out that though we could not have knowledge of God, we could not but accept him as the upholder of justice for the vindication of our moral life.

Like Kant Vivekananda also could not but satisfy the demands of both head and heart. In Jñānakanda he emphatically said - Diverse are the humanity with their poverty, distress, - all these are creations of illusion. Therefore a sort of indisputable inference should be aimed at - there is no meaning getting involved in their many-faced problems. Yet Vivekananda could not help it. A vast sea of compassion flowed through his heart. He refused to be persuaded by bare logic and plunged himself into the great mission of removing the distress of worldly men.

In this respect the reason that he put forth generally runs thus - These diverse creations of God, these multi-natured humanity, are but manifestations of that Supreme God. So we are bound by a family-tie. Whom else shall we serve if not these men? A sort of mental awareness was gradually getting root into his mind. We come across such sentiment in his writings - that supreme Lord alone does exist from eternity to eternity. "He is immanent in the children, his immense power plays through the wife, the husband. He lives in good
as much as he lives in bad and in the sinful. He is in the sinner's heart. He is acting through the violent activities of a murderer. He is in life, He lives in death, and through death”¹⁹.

Out of this perspective emerges the concept of all-pervading Brahman of the Advaita philosophy. At such a stage the philosopher realises at the core of his heart that Brahman is immanent in everything of this phenomenon world. This awareness is identical with the deep perception that is embodied in the Upaniṣads. Sarvam Khalu idam Brahman - everything is Brahman. Vivekananda had this great realisation as well. He said, "Whatever is visible, whatever is audible, whatever you perceive - all these are His creations. In fact, they are the offshoot of that one Soul. To be more precise it is the Lord Himself”²⁰.

Swamiji goes on to say, - God or Brahman is all-pervading, He is revealing Himself through all creatures. In so far as human beings are concerned, He is revealed through them and in them. Man has predominating self-love. All his efforts are aimed at preserving his self-interest. It is solely through the expanding of his mental horizon that a man can outstrip the delimiting conflict of interest between self and not-self.

¹⁹ Swami Vivekananda : Jñāna Yoga (in Bengali) p.263 (Seventeenth Edition)
Solely through this process, self-love can be sublimated. Truly speaking, the primitive motive of man's action does not always tend to self-interest. Even common men at the exigency of circumstances may act as completely free from self-motivation. Self-abnegation for the sake of a friend is not a rare thing. Self-immolation for the sake of one's kinsmen and complete renunciation of self-interest for the beloved one is not rare. Mother is a symbol of self-less love so far as her dear ones are concerned. So even in men of ordinary walks of life, altruistic motive finds full play. - How all these happen? The Upanisads say that husband is dear to his wife. It does not lie always in the greatness of the husband, mother's love for her children is not dependent upon the merit of her children it is for other reasons. It is Brahman or Self that subsists in them. It is due to all-embracing Atman that all things become endearing. Kinsmen, relations, friendship, even ordinary human beings are pervaded by Atman. It is just for these reasons a man is guided by the instinct of love for his fellow-beings. Advaita philosophy of all denominations has this great common concept of immanent Self or Brahman. This identity of kinship with fellow-beings is the motive-force of love.

Vivekananda sings in tune with the harmony of thought nursed by the sages of the Upanisads in the following terms - Even in the midst of encircling self-love, ego of self increases
its horizon. That sole-ego becomes twain at one's marriage, after the birth of children it becomes many. Thus the sole-ego outgrows its self. Finally the entire world is encompassed by the liberated self. Gradually expanding, it transforms itself into universal and perennial love - that sublime love is God Himself. This identification with fellow-being generates love, that elevated soul, inspires the spirit of self-abnegation for universal good. The high ideal and inspiration for social upliftment and benevolence grew through this process.

Thus māyā-vada of Śaṅkara which is a stumbling-block in the way of the great thinkers of the world in so far as it stands between the theory and the reality of life has been wrought into the pattern of human psychology and basic human instinct and biological fact. Through them Vivekananda showed that life is real, life is earnest and its goal is not death.

In this transformation and expansion of Vivekananda's philosophic thought, his Guru Sri Ramakrishna was the greatest source and channel. Ramakrishna's revolutionary and universal message inherent in the remark "Jata Mat Tata Path" - as many views so many are the paths that lead to goal - is all-comprehensive, and it embraces all the religious thoughts so far propounded by humanity. This unifying thought nurtures and preserves the basic truth in all Indian philosophic systems
and religion. Also it encompasses other forms of religion propounded since creation. The seed of unified thought in Indian philosophy and religion - the truth embedded in this statement of Sri Ramakrishna emerged out of his deep meditation and versatile religions practices. What other philosophers tried to find through reason, Ramakrishna found it through his intuitive vision. Yet it was not entirely devoid of reason, because every mind works through a process of reasoning. Vivekananda was deeply inspired by this heavenly ray that has been focussed on the philosophic and religious thought of India by this savant of Dakhineswar. It inspired him into a new sort of intellectual re-thinking on all the philosophies of ancient India. He analysed, scrutinised, collated and gave it a new form, pattern and dimension with new irradiance of its own. In fact, it took shape into a new philosophic thought which is often misunderstood or underestimated by the philosophers in general. My attempt will be to show that it is not only a significant role that Vivekananda played in the philosophic world of thought, he really performed a unique role not in matters of exposition, reconciliation and adumbration but also evolved a system of philosophy which though primarily comprises Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism has in it many trends by virtue of which it attains unique character in respect of its originality.
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