

## **THE PURSUIT OF MA'RIFAT (GNOSIS) IN KASHMIRI SUFI POETRY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper begins with an overview of the process within which the concept Ma'rifat emerged as an expression of the specific kind of knowledge proper to the Sufi discipline. In Kash\_ful Mahjoob, Muhammad Fadl al-Balkhi says: "knowledge is of three kinds—from God, with God, and of God." Knowledge of God is the science of Gnosis (ilm-I ma'rifat), whereby He is known to all His prophets and saints. It cannot be acquired by ordinary means, but is the result of Divine guidance and information. The significance of the concept is examined in relation to Kashmiri Sufi poetry, where the finest expressions of Ma'rifat can be found. The existence of Human Being in Sufism is seen as a macrocosm, and of the Universe as microcosm. When a Sufi attains the stage of Al-Arif (Gnostic) he fathoms the Ultimate Truth and from his head flows a shower of Ultimate knowledge, which becomes an Elixir to his life, and he realizes the unrealized. In this paper it is argued that the definitive and ultimate content of Ma'rifat can be seen more clearly in relation to the principle of tawhīd. For while the tawhīd of the theologian means affirming that there is but one God as opposed to many gods, for the Aarif bi-Llah, the 'knower through God', it entails the spiritual realization that there is but one Reality. The article focusses on the pursuit of a Sufi to gain Ma 'rifat as revealed aptly in Kashmiri Sufi poetry.

**KEYWORDS: Ma'rifat (Gnosis), Aarif, Sufi, Tawhid, Realization, Ultimate Truth, Shahada.**

### **OVERVIEW OF SUFISM AND THE PROCESS OF MA 'RIFAT (GNOSIS)**

Sufism is the most universal manifestation of the inner dimension of Islam; it is the way by which man transcends his own individual self and reaches God (Nasr 32). It provides within the forms of the Islamic revelation the means for an intense spiritual life directed towards the transformation of man's being and the attainment of the spiritual virtues; ultimately it leads to the vision of God. Islam is primarily a "way of knowledge," which means that its spiritual method, its way of bridging the illusory gap between man and God—"illusory," but none the less as real as man's own ego—is centred upon man's intelligence (Schuon 13). Man is conceived of as a "theomorphic" being, a being created in the image of God, and therefore as possessing the three basic qualities: intelligence, free-will, and speech. Intelligence is central to the human state and gains a saving quality through its content, which in Islam is the Shahāda or "profession of faith": Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh, "There is no god but Allah"; through the Shahāda man comes to know the Absolute and the nature of reality, and thus also the way to salvation. The element of will, however, must also be taken into account, because it exists and only through it can man choose to conform to the Will of the Absolute. Speech, or communication with God, becomes the means—through prayer in general or in Sufism through quintessential prayer or invocation (dhikr)—of actualizing man's awareness of the Absolute and of leading intelligence and will back to their essence (13-18).

It is important to begin this discussion of the rise of Ma'rifat as a distinct concept within the Sufi tradition by stressing that the spiritual knowledge to which the notion refers is rooted in the essential sources of Islamic spirituality, namely the Quranic Revelation on the one hand, and the spiritual realization of the Prophet on the other. Through the spiritual methods of Sufism, the Shahāda is integrally realized within the being of the knower. The "knowledge" of Reality which results from this realization, however, must not be confused with knowledge as it is usually understood in everyday language, for this realized knowledge is "To know what is, and to know it in such a fashion as to be oneself, truly and effectively, what one knows" (Guenon 10). If the human ego, with which fallen man usually identifies himself, were a closed system, such knowledge would be beyond man's reach. However, in the view of Sufism, like other traditional metaphysical doctrines, the ego is only a transient mode of man's true and transcendent self. Therefore, the attainment of metaphysical knowledge in its true sense, or "spiritual realization," is the removal of the veils which separate man from God and from the full reality of his own true nature. It is the means of actualizing the full potentialities of the human state.

Metaphysical knowledge in the sense just described can perhaps be designated best by the term "gnosis" (Ma'rifat), which in its original sense and as related to Sufism means "Wisdom made up of knowledge and sanctity" (Palmer 8). The Ma'rifat of the Sufis is the gnosis of Hellenistic theosophy, i.e. direct knowledge of God based on revelation or apocalyptic vision. It is not the result of any mental process, but depends entirely on the will and favour of God, who bestows it as a gift from Himself upon those whom He has created with the capacity for receiving it. It is a light of divine grace that flashes into the heart and overwhelms every human faculty in its dazzling beams.

Consistent with her Saivite background, Lal Ded, in her vakhs, neither characterizes the world as illusory nor recommends external renunciation. She looks upon the objective universe as the Swarupa Itself (the Real Form) that parallels the Sufi view of the physical world as Wahadat-ul-wajud. She celebrates her spiritual heights in an ecstatic way:

Lal bo tsaayes so-mann baa-gi baras/ Wuchhum shiv sha-kath meelith te wah! / Tattie Lai Karmes Amrit-saras/  
Zindai maras te me Kari kya

(Lalla wilfully entered the garden door of self. There I behold Shiv and Shakti merged in one, and Lo! Absorbed in that Vision I dissolved in Him alive. Realized the essence and tasted the sweetness of the divine Elixir, I would die while alive, how can He stop me.)

Many Sufis speak of gnosis as being synonymous with love, but “love” in their vocabulary excludes the sentimental colourings usually associated with this term in current usage. The term love is employed by them because it indicates more clearly than any other word that in gnosis the whole of one’s being “knows” the object and not just the mind; and because love is the most direct reflection in this world, or the truest “symbol” in the traditional sense, of the joy and beatitude of the spiritual world. Moreover, in Sufism, as in other traditions, the instrument of spiritual knowledge or gnosis is the heart, the centre of man’s being; gnosis is “existential” rather than purely mental (Schuon 50).

In Kash\_ful Mahjoob, Muhammad Fadl al-Balkhi says: “knowledge is of three kinds—from God, with God, and of God.” Knowledge of God is the science of Gnosis (ilm-I ma’rifat), whereby He is known to all His prophets and saints. Sufism deals first and foremost with the inward aspects of that which is expressed outwardly or exoterically in the Sharia, the Islamic religious law. Hence it is commonly called “Islamic esotericism” (Burckhardt 1). In the view of the Sufis, exoteric Islam is concerned with laws and injunctions which direct human action and life in accordance with the divine Will, whereas Sufism concerns direct knowledge of God and realization—or literally, the “making real” and actual—of spiritual realities which exist both within the external form of the Revelation and in the being of the spiritual traveller (salik). The Sharia is directly related to Sufism inasmuch as it concerns itself with translating these same realities into laws which are adapted to the individual and social orders.

Sub-hech Nimaz yellih wuznaavnai/ Aabas saeet mil-naavnai

Kaabas kun ha sajda divnaawai / Deedar-e- movla haawai yo ( Rahim sb )

(When the morning prayer will wake you up, shall dissolve you into water. Will make you bend towards Mecca and give you the glimpse of God.)

### **PURIFYING THE SOUL**

Inspiration and unveiling are indispensable for he who wants to clear a path towards this God who appears as “the Light of the heavens and the earth” (Quran 24:35). It is for this reason that all Sufis sought to make room in themselves for the “radiation” (tajalli) of this light. Unblocking human nature from its opacity, just as the sun drives away darkness, (Cf. Quran, 92:2.) this theophany reveals God to the heart of man. As-Sarrāj observes that the simple believer sees by the light of God, while the gnostic sees by God Himself (qtd. in Geoffroy 13). Later, Ibn ‘Arabī would explain how multiplicity is spread from its start in Unicity through a succession of uninterrupted theophanies that take innumerable forms. The Sufi thus sees God in all being, in every manifested thing.

### **UNITING ONESELF WITH GOD, OR “EXTINGUISHING ONESELF” IN HIM?**

The ultimate goal of the mystical life cannot be: ‘to know God’ but ‘to be united with Him’. However, in Islam one cannot speak of a via unitiva in the same sense as in Christian theology. From the point of view of the central dogma of tawḥīd, which focuses only on “the divine Unicity,” the very concept of “union” with God is eminently paradoxical (Michon and Gaetani 86).

The central concern of the Ṣufis, as of every Muslim, is tawḥīd, the witness that “There is no deity but Allah.” This truth has to be realized in the existence of each individual. A prominent Kashmiri Sufi, Sheikh ul Alam Says:

La : Ila:ha Ill\_Allah sahiy korum/ vahi korum panun pa:n

waju:d travith mu:ju:d sorum/ ada boh vo:tus la:maka:n

(there is no deity but God, did I verify and confirm; my self ‘I’ quite burnt away. Ignoring the manifest, I mediated on the Everlasting. So was the Spaceless (divine world) realized to me)

Indeed, union presumes the coming together of two entities, of two substances. Now, the profession of faith (shahāda) of Islam affirms: “There is no god but Allah.” For the Sufi, this negative assertion actually means: “Only God exists,” since that which is created, the contingent, vanishes in the face of the Absolute. Therefore, the Sufi doesn’t live in a state of union, strictly speaking, since in Islam there is no continuity of substance between God and creation. His goal is “extinction in God” (fana). Removed from the various solicitations of the world, the initiate then knows the intoxication of immersion in the divine Presence. To quote Shams faqir:

Fana sapdakh faana faeni / Baqa billah chhu rabbaeni

(You’ll be annihilated here forever, the life in God is supreme.)

Being completely unaware of himself as subject-consciousness, he becomes a mirror in which God contemplates Himself. This state paradoxically opens up the horizons of Knowledge, for man can only have access to divine realities when his ego no longer interposes itself in his contemplation, that is to say when divine Being shows through in him (86). In the first phase, the one of fana, a person doesn't see anything outside of God; in the second, the one of baqa, he sees Him in everything. After the intoxication of immersion in God comes the soberness that allows the initiate to be with God and with the world at the same time. Letting God do with him as He will, he achieves his ontological servitude while at the same time putting himself at the service of men.

This double experience of fana/baqa is so essential in Sufism that Junayd thought that it is this experience alone which defines it. "Taṣawwuf," he said, "is summed up thus: the Real [or, the 'Truth,' i.e. God] makes you die to yourself, and causes you to come alive again through Him." (A-Qushayri 280) The initiatic death, as implied by the experience of fana/baqa, is a response to the Prophet's injunction: mutu qabla anta mutu "Die before you die!" Specifically, it is inscribed in the example of Muhammad (SAW), he who "has been sent" among men to guide them. Extending the dogma of the divine Unicity and the spiritual "tasting" of fana, some Sufis explained that God is One in the sense that He alone possesses Being: in manifesting creatures, He endowed them with an existence emanating from His Being, but this has only an ontological content that is relative, or even non-existent. Many exoteric scholars have fought against this metaphysical formulation, which is known as the "oneness of Being" (wahdat al-wujud) because it has seemed to them to deny divine transcendence. The meaning of wahdat al-wujud, if not the actual expression, can be found in sources ranging from certain Quranic verses, such as "Whithersoever ye turn there is the Face of God" (2:1 15), to certain sayings of the Prophet, such as ana Ahmad bila meem "I am 'Ahmad' without the letter 'm'" (meaning Ahad or the One, referring to the inner oneness of the Prophet with the Source of all being) (Nasr 55). It is also the theme of many poems, some of which are among the greatest masterpieces of Sufi poetry. In the words of a Kashmiri Sufi poet Rahman Dar, the same thought can be observed as he says:

Nur nish nur paedeh draav  
Ahadas ahmad kornai naav  
Muhammad laaegith bazar draav  
Bahar aav jani jananai

(Divine Light emanated from the Divine Light. In the same way Ahad (the unidentical One) was named Ahmad. In the guise of Muhammad (SAW), He sends Ahad into this world and the world was bloomed with His coming.) (He send his Beloved Muhammad SAW to manifest Himself and to bloom this universe).

As for its full exposition, it must be sought in works of Sufi metaphysics. The poems of Sheikh Noor-ud Din Wali do reveal that he did receive God's grace and in ample measure. The veil of illusion was lifted, as Sufis claim, from the face of the Truth. Light of God shone upon him destroying darkness of doubt and ignorance. His intense penance, unalloyed faith, strict control of his sense organs, and absolute riddance from the powerful forces of obscuration, such as greed, lust, egotism and desire for worldly goods had, at last, borne fruit. He attained the realization of the Divine Being. The affirmation of this 'state' is made in the following verses:

Da:l go:m mi:lith Aliphas ta Hayas/ Ami hayan kornam bayas na:sh  
Sheshikal troprim Ahadakis payas/ Meema\_rous Ahmad logum ra;sh  
Sheyi\_wanna phyu:rus mo:yas mo:yas/ Ada par mokalyom ta kodum va:sh

(‘Da:l’ got suffixed to ‘Aliph’ and ‘Hai’. And ‘hai’ destroyed my fear!. Six (apertures) of sense did I close to gain clue to the One. Minus ‘Meem’, Ahmad (became Ahad) — the source of my joy. I roamed about the six forests, every nook and corner; lo! And behold! My wings came unfolded and I stretched myself.)

Tsha:nja:m bhava\_nan beyyi shen dishen/ neib ta nisha:n lobmas na konei  
Pristsha:m mala\_ba:ban ta tapa\_reshan/ tim lagi bu:zi revanei  
Dab yelli dyutamas fikran ta andeishan/ ada sui dyu:nthum boh na kunei

(I looked for Him in the Bhawans and six directions. Neither any mark nor clue did I come upon. I enquired of the Mullahas (Islamic clerics) and the Hermits. Hearing me they only bemoaned (their ignorance) as I subdued my logic and doubts. Lo! I found Him all-pervading and myself naught.)

Su me nishe boh tas nishe/ Me tas nishe qarar aav  
Na:haqqa tso:ndum me pardishei/ pananei dishei qarar a:v

(Close by me stood He, and I by Him. Relaxed felt I by His vey side. Wrongly had I looked for Him in alien lands. (When) I found solace within myself)

In any case, to understand even the theoretical meaning of the oneness of Being on any level requires a certain intellectual intuition as well as intellectual preparation, in addition to Divine grace, while only the saint who has reached the end of the Sufi path and become drowned in the Ocean of Divinity can know its meaning fully and in the ultimate sense.

The knowledge of which Sufism speaks is not mental knowledge but a light that illuminates the beholder of this knowledge and in fact all around it and finally returns the human being to its Source, the Supernal Sun. On the highest level, the subject as well as the object of this knowledge is God. The gnostic in Sufism is called al- Arif bi'Llah, one who knows by God and not one who knows God, for ultimately it is only the Divine Spark within us that can know the Divine. Our duty is to remove the veils within that prevent such a unitive knowledge from taking place.

Nur -I tajjalli woth akki aanai / Soor gov kohi-tooras

Kohi-toor behtar kohi-maaranai / be-ha waana waanai choownas moi (Rahim sb )

(The Divine Ray of Light burned down the Mount Sinai into ashes. Mount Sinai is better than Mount Haari Parbat [Koh-i-Maran lies on the west of Dal Lake in Srinagar, J&K]. I got intoxicated with Ma'rifat at every tavern)

Sufis agree on the necessity of devoting oneself to the purification of the soul (tazkiyat an-nafs), which is the only way that can bring about the emergence of a noble character (khuluq) and the proper inward and outward attitude (adab) in a human being. In doing this their intention is to follow the model of the Prophet: "Surely thou art endowed with a tremendous character (khuluq)," says the Quran addressing the Prophet (SAW) (68:4). To quote Shams Faqir:

Marifat kya kari naapaak baanas/ Tas nadaanas kar tsalli tsaai

(Marifat is of no use to an impure soul, when will that Innocent man realize?)

The noble virtues (akhlāq, pl. of khuluq) that Sufis endeavour to acquire are therefore the same as those of Islam, but Sufis give them particular weight by bringing them to life within themselves; thus, these virtues are transmuted into initiatic stations. The Sufi then dwells into various spiritual stations (maqāmaat). Kashmiri Sufis have described some these maqaamaats for instance Shams Fakir talks of seven maqaamats in his poetry:

Sath samandar chhim peth mmeani taaley

Ath daryaavs kati tari naav

Ani gatti Shamso tsoung kous zaaley

Meha gos baaley choun deedar

(there are seven oceans upon my head, how to cross a boat across the river. Oh Shams who shall dare to ignite a lamp in the night, I wish to see my beloved.)

The Sufi who sets out to seek God calls himself a 'traveller' (salik); he advances by slow 'stages' (maqamat) along a 'path' (tariqat) to the goal of union with Reality (fana fil-Haqq). Should he venture to make a map of this interior ascent, it will not correspond exactly with any of those made by previous explorers. Such maps or scales of perfection were elaborated by Sufi teachers at an early period, and the unlucky Moslem habit of systematising has produced an enormous after crop. The 'path' expounded by the author of the Kitab al-Luma, perhaps the oldest comprehensive treatise on Sufism that we now possess, consists of the following seven 'stages', each of which (except the first member of the series) is the result of the 'stages' immediately preceding it— (1) Repentance, (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) satisfaction. The 'stages' constitute the ascetic and ethical discipline of the Sufi, and must be carefully distinguished from the so called 'states' (ahwal, plural of hal), which form a similar psychological chain. The writer whom I have just quoted enumerates ten 'states'—meditation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquillity, contemplation, and certainty. While the 'stages' can be acquired and mastered by one's own efforts, the 'states' are spiritual feelings and dispositions over which a man has no control: "They descend from God into his heart, without his being able to repel them when they come or to retain them when they go" (Nicholson 29).

The Sufi's path is not finished until he has traversed all the stages, making himself perfect in every one of them before advancing to the next, and has also experienced whatever states it pleases God to bestow upon him. Then, and only then, is he permanently raised to the higher planes of consciousness which Sufis call the Gnosis and the Truth, where the seeker becomes the knower or gnostic and realises that knowledge, knower, and known are One (12).

To the discerning reader, Shamas Faqir's description of the Sufi path must appear suggestively similar to the spiritual 'adventure' given in other varieties of religious mysticism (including Hindu and Christian mysticism). In several poems, he makes use of the via-negativa and via-affirmativa approaches in his accounts of the Divine. Each of these approaches to Reality involves a characteristic language use, which the poet accomplishes so well; sometimes we find the two approaches deftly interwoven in the same poem. In quite a few poems, we come across direct allusions to the Persian mystic, Mansur-al-Hallaj, and the doctrine of An-al-Haq (I am Truth) that he boldly preached.

Chhukhay beena vun dyeu pa:nas

Tas na: da:nas kar tsali tcha:y

(If you have the vision, then introspect about yourself

When will that innocent man realize the truth?)

...

Shamas faqeeran kuner prouvum

Ja:nas mi: lith jaha:nay

(Shams Faqir achieved the union

The whole world has merged into his self)

Several lyrics of Shamas Faqir centre round the theme of the mystic's quest for the primal cause of this universe.

Shamsa ats durah kin, sapdakh gyaeeeni

Dil-kui barr mutsraav

Aftaabek paeeth fear aasmaeeni

Aagur kaemi nishi draav

(O Shamas, to attain gnosis,

Throw open your heart's door;

Sun-like, roam around the sky

(To fathom the Secret);

What is the fountain-head?)

We can see that the poem poses vital and thought-provoking questions regarding the First Cause. It instructs the seeker to pursue the spiritual journey inwardly to realize the Self. This would naturally call for annihilation of the little self. The answer to the imponderable question regarding the source of the Cosmos is provided through the intertwined images of the 'drop' and the 'river'. In the concluding lines, that lay stress on cleansing the heart as a means to inward transformation, the tone of the poem changes as the poet addresses his own self. Without sounding the didactic, the changed tone stimulates self-introspection in the reader/listener.

The Persian Sufi poets have often used the word rinda in their lyrics. It refers to the true lover, a liberated soul (not tied to this or that school). With its rich associations, it has been absorbed into Kashmiri Sufi poetry and has by now got into common usage among the Kashmiris (Cyprian 28). It occurs frequently in Shamas Faqir's verse too. This is how the poet instructs the aspiring gnostic:

Zinda paanai gassi marun-ye / Rinda Sar ho sapdei kun-ye

(O rinda, in order to realize the One, Learn to die while still alive.) (trans. A.N. Dhar)

Emphasis is laid in the poem on self-conquest as being the stepping stone to advancement in spirituality. An Arif's, devotion has to consist in 'cleansing of the doors of perception', which involves a disciplining of the mind and the senses. He has to be discriminative and mentally alert throughout. Shamas Faqir is explicit about this quality required of the true aspirant:

Unn laegith wunn gassi dyun\_ye

Naeri byiun byiun zagg tai prawun\_ye

Hath dall diyth ner\_mal nun\_ye

Rinda sar ho sapdi kun-ye

(Seemingly blind, look keenly for what you seek, O rinda! Sifting the pure grain from the impure winnowing the grains a hundred times will reveal the Precious One to you.) (trans. A.N. Dhar)

Lal Ded says that one who thinks himself not different from the other; one who accepts sorrow as good as pleasure; one who frees himself from duality; he and he alone tells the beads of Lord of the Lords (Almighty) and this is the basic thinking of Shaivism. She held a key to many mystic truths (Parimoo 6). The following stanza illustrates her deep mystic thought:

Dham Dham kormas dhamann haley

Prezleovum dieep te naneyem zaath

Andrim prekaash nebar htsotum

Gatti rotum te kaemas thaff

(So my lamp of knowledge afar,

Fanned by slow breath from the throat of me.

They, my bright soul to my self revealed.

Winnowed I abroad my inner light.

And with darkness around me sealed,

Did I garner truth and hold Him tight.) (Trans. Sir Richard Temple)

Lal Ded thinks dissolution of self (Aham) essential for Realisation. According to her, seeker (Sadhaka/salik) has to reach that mental attitude where there is no difference between Him and self. She says one who considers his own self and

others alike ends the distinction between 'I' and 'you', who treats days and nights alike, who is above sorrows and pleasures, can only realize God in his own self. According to her, differentiation between the human soul and Divine-self was Naught.

A Sufi on his way to illumination undergoes many changing spiritual states such as qabd and bast. He feels at certain times "constraint and happy spiritual expansion, fear and hope, and longing and intimacy, which are granted by God and last for longer or shorter periods of time, changing in intensity according to the station in which the mystic is abiding at the moment." (Encyclopedia Britannica) The Sufi reaches to a point of his spiritual development in Ma'rifat ("gnosis") or in maḥabbah ("love"), the central subject of Sufism since the 9th century, which implies a union of lover and beloved. In Sufism the final goal is fanā ("annihilation"), primarily an ethical concept of annihilating one's own qualities and Sufis stress on complete extinction of personality/ existence (Arberry 17). In the words of a Shams Fakir:

Hasti dur kar near ats andrai  
Wuchh\_han jani jaanaan

(Extinct your existence and go inside your own. You will see the Beloved)

According to the prophetic saying "Take over the qualities of God," but slowly developing into a complete extinction of the personality. Some Sufis teach that beyond this negative unity where the self is completely effaced, the baqa, ("duration, life in God") is found: the ecstatic experience, called intoxication, is followed by the "second sobriety"—i.e., the return of the completely transformed mystic into this world where he acts as a living witness of God or continues the "journey in God." The Sufi has reached haqīqah ("reality"), after finishing the ṭarīqah ("path"), which is built upon the sharī'ah ("law"). Later, the disciple is led through fanā fī ash-shaykh ("annihilation in the master") to fanā fī-Rasūl ("annihilation in the Prophet") before reaching, if at all, fanā fī-Allāh ("annihilation in God"). In conclusion, I reiterate that Kashmiri Sufi poetry is outstanding in its grasp and assimilation of many mystical concepts like Ma 'rifat.

The Sufi poetry of Kashmir is an expression of inner states of mind and manifestation of several metaphysical experiences. Because of strong spiritual and mystic traditions, Sufi poets of Kashmir have found the atmosphere quite conducive to their quest. The way these Sufi poets have preserved and enriched the mystic and spiritual traditions of Kashmir is quite appreciative. They do not reject the Sharia, which is fundamental to Islamic Sufism, but come up with a new and creative interpretation of it in the light of their own intense spiritual experiences. In their verses they describe the spiritual attainments of the saint concerned, pay their tribute, and makes a fervent prayer to God to bless them the same way. Accentuation is laid in the Kashmiri Sufi poetry on triumph toward oneself as being the venturing stone to headway in otherworldly existence. An Aarif's commitment needs to comprise in 'purging of the entryways of observation', which includes a training of the brain and the faculties. He must be rationally cautious all through. Kashmiri Sufi poetry is explicit about this quality required of the true aspirant.

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