

# KARMA IN THE PALI SUTTAS

Key suttas widely available in translation:

MN 136 Mahākammavibhanga Sutta (M.ii.207, MDB 1058,  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.136.nymo.html>)

MN 61 Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda Sutta (M.i.414, MDB 523,  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.061.than.html>)

MN 57 Kukkuravatika Sutta (M.i.389, MDB 495, below, and  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.057.nymo.html>)

## Two Fundamental Teachings required For Context

Friends, there are groups of wanderers and priests that misrepresent me with lying, empty, baseless, insincere words: "The samaṇa Gotama, who leads people astray to their ruin, lays out a creed of the vacancy, destruction, and nonexistence of beings."

That these wanderers and priests misrepresent me with lying, empty, baseless, insincere words for the reason that I have never said such things, you'll never find me saying such things.

In the past as well as now, friends, I teach just suffering and the remainderless quenching of suffering. (*Pubbe cāhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañceva paññāpemi, dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ.*)<sup>1</sup>

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When this exists, this naturally exists (*Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*);

Due to the arising of this, this consequently arises (*Imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati*).

When this does not exist, this naturally does not exist (*Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti*);

Due to the quenching of this, this consequently quenches (*Imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MN 22: Alagaddūpama Sutta, M.i.140 (also S.iii.119 and S.iv.384), MDB 234. Translated from *The Buddha's Life from His Own Lips*, pp. 287.

<sup>2</sup> MN 79 Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta, M.ii.32 (also S.ii.28, S.iii.63, A.v.184, and others), MDB 655, Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* p 3.

### Seeing *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is Intelligence in Matters of Karma<sup>3</sup>

That one is a brahmin by birth cannot be found;  
And that one is by birth not a brahmin cannot be found either:  
One is a brahmin by karma and not a brahmin by karma.  
One is a farmer by karma, a craftsman by karma,  
One is a merchant by karma, a servant by karma,  
One is a bandit even by karma, a soldier by karma,  
One is a chief minister by karma, even a Rāja by karma.  
The learned see karma truthfully in this way  
Thus are considered Seers of *paṭiccasamuppāda*,  
Intelligent regarding the Fruits of Karma.  
The world goes according to karma,  
the varieties of beings carry on according to karma  
Beings are constricted by karma, like the carriage bar of a chariot.  
Through ascetic practices, living the holy life, restraint, and training of self  
One becomes a brahmin, this is the highest level of brahmin.  
There is one who is accomplished in the three *vijjā*,  
calmed, having ended new becoming.  
Vāseṭṭha, you ought to know such a person as  
the Brahma, the Sakka, of those who know.

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### Four Kinds of Karma, Including the Karma that Ends Karma<sup>4</sup>

Puṇṇa, with supreme wisdom having insight into these four kinds of karma (action), I have proclaimed them. What are the four?

Puṇṇa, there is dark karma with dark fruit (*vipāka*), there is bright karma with bright fruit, there is dark and bright karma with dark and bright fruit, and there is neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright fruit.

Puṇṇa, ... some people in certain situations concoct *kāyasankhāra* (concoctings regarding body) ... *vacīśankhāra* (concoctings regarding speech) ... *manosankhāra* (concoctings regarding mind) that lead to dukkha. Then they enter a world of suffering and are touched by painful contacts ... and experience only painful feelings, such as the various beings in hell ... Puṇṇa, this is dark karma with dark fruit.

Puṇṇa, ... some people in certain situations concoct *kāyasankhāra* ... *vacīśankhāra*... *manosankhāra* that do not lead to dukkha. Then they enter a world without suffering and are not touched by painful contacts ... and experience only pleasant feelings, such as the *sukhakinhā devas* ... Puṇṇa, this is bright karma with bright fruit.

Puṇṇa, ... some people in certain situations concoct *kāyasankhāra* ... *vacīśankhāra*... *manosankhāra* that sometimes lead to dukkha and sometimes do not. Then they enter a world that is sometimes suffering and sometimes without suffering, they are sometimes touched by painful contacts and sometimes free of

<sup>3</sup> Sutta-Nipāta, Mahāvagga, Vāseṭṭha Sutta verses 655 ff, Saddhatissa p. 75. Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 137.

<sup>4</sup> MN 57 Kukkuravāditka Sutta, M.i.389, MDB 495. Spoken to Puṇṇakoliyaputta, a cow duty ascetic, at Haliddavasana settlement, Koliya territory. Translated from *The Buddha's Life from His Own Lips*, pp. 265.

painful contacts ... and experience feelings that are a mix of pleasurable and painful, such as human beings, some kinds of devas, and some kinds of powerless beings ... Puṇṇa, this is dark and bright karma with dark and bright fruit.

Puṇṇa, ... in certain situations, the intention to abandon dark karma with dark fruit, the intention to abandon bright karma with bright fruit, and the intention to abandon dark and bright karma with dark and bright fruit is karma that is neither dark nor bright with fruit that is neither dark nor bright and **leads to the end of karma**.

Puṇṇa, these are the four kinds of karma that I have realized with supreme wisdom.

**Ajahn Buddhāsa's Note:** This matter of 4 kinds of karma appears in numerous suttas, with the same details in some places and different details in others: in the Kammavagga of the AN Fours, the Saṃkhitta Sutta (A.ii.230) and Vitthāra Sutta (A.ii.230, Cf NDB 123) have the same details as above for all four kinds; Paṭhamasikkhāpada Sutta (A.ii.234) has dark karma explained in terms of violating the five precepts and bright karma in terms of upholding the five precepts, while the other two karmas are the same as above; Dutiyasikkhāpada Sutta (A.ii.234, 21/319/236) has dark karma explained in terms of the five heinous actions and bright karma in terms of the ten bases of wholesome action; Ariyamagga Sutta (A.ii.235, 21/320/237) has the first three kinds of karma explained the same as above while the fourth is in terms of the noble eightfold path; Bojjhaṅga Sutta (A.ii.236, 21/321/238) has the first three kinds of karma explained the same as above while the fourth is in terms of the seven factors of awakening. In some cases the Buddha spoke to bhikkhus and in other suttas he spoke to other kinds of people.

In other words, the noble eightfold path and the seven factors of awakening are karma that ends karma.

## Contact is the Birthplace of Karma<sup>5</sup>

Friends, how is the *kamma* that ought to be clearly known? I speak of intention (*cetanā*) as action because when someone has intention he acts via body, via speech, and via mind.

Bhikkhus, what is the birthplace (*nidānasambhava*) of those actions? The birthplace of those actions is contact (*phassa*).

Bhikkhus, what is the diversity (*vemattatā*) of those actions? There are actions that lead to experiencing the hell realms, there are actions that lead to experiencing the beastly realms, there are actions that lead to experiencing the natures of hungry ghosts, there are actions that lead to experiencing the human worlds, and there are actions that lead to experiencing the deva worlds. I speak of these as the diversity of *kamma*.

Bhikkhus, what are the fruits (*vipāka*) of those actions? I speak of the fruits of those *kamma* as being threefold: fruit that is immediately experiencable (*diṭṭhadhamma*), that happens soon after (*upapajja*), and that occurs some time after that (*aparapariyāya*). I speak of these as the fruits of *kamma*.

Bhikkhus, how is the quenching (*nirodha*) of action? When contact quenches, *kamma* quenches.

Bhikkhus, what is the way of practice leading to the quenching of action (*kammanirodha-gāmininpaṭipadā*)? The noble eightfold path is the way of practice leading to the quenching of action,

<sup>5</sup> AN Sixes, Nibbedhika Sutta, A.iii.415, NDB 173. Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 296.

namely, *sammāditthi*, *sammāsankappa*, *sammāvācā*, *sammākammanta*, *sammā-ājiva*, *sammāvāyāma*, *sammāsati*, and *sammāsamādhi*.

Bhikkhus, whenever a noble disciple clearly understands *kamma*, the birth place of *kamma*, the diversity of *kamma*, the fruits of *kamma*, the quenching of *kamma*, and the way of practice leading to the quenching of *kamma* like this; then that noble disciple clearly understands the *brahmacariya* as the means of penetrating to the quenching of action (*kammanirodha*).

**Ajahn Buddhādāsa's comment:** Please observe the most important meaning here where the Buddha says that the birthplace of *kamma* is contact and the cause of *kamma*'s quenching is the quenching of contact. This shows that birth and quenching reoccur repeatedly within this individuality. Thus, the fruits of *kamma* reoccur repeatedly within this individuality, whether in *diṭṭhadhamma*, in *upapajja*, or in *aparapariyāya* (even though the latter two are usually understood to occur after entering the coffin). Please consider carefully what is correct in this matter.

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## Experience of Pleasure & Pain are Not Because of Previous Actions<sup>6</sup>

Friends, there are these three sectarian views that however they are considered, evaluated, and critiqued by the learned ones, no matter how much they are turned and spun, these views will lead to inaction regarding what is wholesome.

What sort of sectarian views are these three? These three views are:

- ☞ certain groups of wanderers and priests teach and hold the view that "all persons who experience pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain do so because of previous actions (*kamma*)";
- ☞ certain groups of wanderers and priests teach and hold the view that "all persons who experience pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain, do so because of God's (*Issara*) creative power"; and
- ☞ certain groups of wanderers and priests teach and hold the view that "all persons who experience pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain, do so for no reason whatsoever."

Friends, I have approached and questioned groups of wanderers and priests who teach and hold such sectarian views ... I said to them, "If that is the case, those who kill beings ... steal ... misbehave sexually ... speak falsely ... provoke discord ... speak crudely ... speak frivolously ... are greedy of heart ... have ill-will ... have perverted views, must do so because of actions previously acted ... or because of God's creative power ... or for no reason whatsoever. When actions done previously or God's creative power or no reason whatsoever is taken as the primary issue, those individuals will have no desire and will make no effort regarding things that ought and ought not to be done. When appropriate acts are not accomplished and inappropriate acts are not abandoned with sincerity, these people who lack the mindfulness to guard themselves have nothing by which to honestly call themselves *samaṇa* (seekers of truth, wanderers)."

Friends, this is how I Dhammically rebuked the wanderers and priests who held such sectarian views.

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<sup>6</sup> AN Threes, Mahāvagga, Tithāyatanādi Sutta, A.i.173, NDB 61. Translated from *The Buddha's Life from His Own Lips*, pp. 411.

## Action & Effort are Required<sup>7</sup>

Friends, among all the cloths woven from fibers, cloth woven from human hair is the poorest. When the weather is cold, cloth woven from human hair is too cool; when the weather is hot, it is really hot; the colors are not attractive, it has a foul odor, and it is coarse. In the same way, among all the different sects of the thick-headed wanderers, the Makkhalivāda sect is the worst.

The worthless Makkhali says and is of the opinion that "there is no action (*kamma*), there is no activity (*kiriya*), and there is no effort (*virīya*)." (*In other words, in this world do not even think of the results of actions, there are not even the actions themselves. Whatever one might do is equivalent to not doing anything at all.*)

The Worthy, Perfectly Self-Awakened Buddhas of the distant past always spoke of there being action, activity, and effort. The worthless Makkhali disputes with all of those Worthy, Perfectly Self-Awakened Buddhas in claiming "there is no action, there is no activity, and there is no effort."

Friends, the Worthy, Perfectly Self-Awakened Buddhas that will appear in the future for a long time will always speak of there being action, activity, and effort. The worthless Makkhali disputes with all of those Worthy, Perfectly Self-Awakened Buddhas in claiming "there is no action, there is no activity, and there is no effort."

At this time even myself, a Worthy, Perfectly Self-Awakened Buddha, speaks of there being action, activity, and effort. The worthless Makkhali disputes with me in claiming "there is no action, there is no activity, and there is no effort."

Friends, just as someone places a fish trap at the mouth of a river not to aid the fish but for their pain, struggle, and ruin, just so the worthless Makkhali appears in the world like someone who sets out traps for humans not for their benefit but for the pain, struggle, and ruin of many beings.

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## This Body is Old Karma<sup>8</sup>

Friends, this body is not yours nor does it belong to someone else. You ought to see this "old karma" (body) as something concocted by conditions (*abhisankhata*), as conditioned by impulses (*abhisancetayita*), and as capable of experiencing sense objects (*vedanīya*).

Friends, in the case of this body the noble disciple who has listened well reflects with systematic care concerning *paṭiccasamuppāda* that "Because this exists, this exists; through the arising of this, this arises; because this does not exist, this does not exist; through the quenching of this, this quenches;" in other words, "with ignorance as condition, there are concoctings; with concoctings as condition, there is consciousness; ... *and so on through* ... with birth as condition, there is aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in full. The entire mass of dukkha arises in just this way."

Through the fading away and remainderless quenching of ignorance, concoctings quenches; with the quenching of concoctings, consciousness quenches; with the quenching of consciousness, mind-body quenches; ... *and so on through* ... with the quenching of clinging, becoming quenches; with the

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<sup>7</sup> AN Threes, Yodhājīvavagga, Kesakambala Sutta, A.i.287. Translated from *The Buddha's Life from His Own Lips*, pp. 418.

<sup>8</sup> SN 12:37 Kaṭṭhākhattivagga, Lokāyatika Sutta, CDB 575, Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* p 64.

quenching of becoming, birth quenches; with the quenching of birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair utterly quench. The entire mass of dukkha quenches in just this way."

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### **Karma Bears Fruit within this Individuality<sup>9</sup>**

Friends, there are these three causes (*hetu*) for the occurrence of actions (*karma*). What are these three? The three are greed (*lobha*) as a cause for the occurrence of actions, hatred (*dosa*) as a cause for the arising of actions, and delusion (*moha*) as a cause for the occurrence of actions.

Any action that one has carried out with greed, arising with greed as its cause, and having greed as its origin; that action bears fruit within the aggregates that are the basis for ones individuality. In whichever individuality that kamma bears fruit, one experiences that karmic fruit within that very individuality, either immediately, soon after, or some time later.<sup>10</sup>

*(The exact same description is applied to hatred and delusion, word for word.)*

Friends, this is comparable with plant seeds that have not broken, rotted, or been destroyed by wind and sun, that have been chosen for their soundness, carefully stored, and planted by someone in a well prepared plot with good top soil. Further, the rain falls according to the season. Those seeds will sprout, develop, and thrive most certainly. In the same way, any action that someone has carried out with greed ... hatred ... delusion, arising with greed ... hatred ... delusion as its cause, and having greed ... hatred ... delusion as its origin; that action bears fruit within the aggregates that are the basis for his individuality. In whichever individuality that kamma bears fruit, he experiences that karmic fruit within that very individuality, either immediately, a moment later, or some time later.

These are the three causes for the occurrence of actions (*kamma*).

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Friends, there are these three causes (*hetu*) for the occurrence of actions (*karma*). What are these three? The three are non-greed (*alobha*) as a cause for the occurrence of actions, non-hatred (*adosa*, goodwill) as a cause for the arising of actions, and non-delusion (*amoha*) as a cause for the occurrence of actions.

*(The wording is the same as the above section with non-greed substituting for greed, non-hatred substituting for hatred, and non-delusion substituting for delusion.)*

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<sup>9</sup> AN Threes, Devadūtavagga, Nidāna Sutta, A.i.134, NDB 49. Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 131.

<sup>10</sup> The Pali terms *diṭṭhadhamma*, *uppajja*, and *aparapariyāya* are often interpreted to mean "this life," "the next life," and "subsequent lives." We have used more literal translations here.

*Any karma that the actor sees as born  
from greed, hatred, or delusion,  
once done, whether little or great,  
that karma will bear fruit to be  
experienced within this individuality.  
No other basis can be found.  
Therefore, the practitioner  
who clearly understands greed, hatred, and delusion,  
summons true knowledge and thereby  
abandons all evil, unwholesome actions.*

**Ajahn Buddhāsa's comment:** The student should observe that the terms *diṭṭhadhamma*, *uppajja*, and *aparapariyāya* (*diṭṭeva dhamme uppajje vā apare vā pariyāye*). In Thailand we are familiar with these terms in the forms *diṭṭhadhammavedanīya*, *uppajjavedanīya*, and *aparāparavedanīya* and generally understand the first to mean any time in this life up until death and the later two to refer to times after death. However, this sutta demonstrates that all three occur in this life, before physical death, or within this individuality, which corresponds to *jāti* (birth) in the language of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. That is, any time there is *upādāna*, there is a *jāti*, which can happen many times each day. Thus, *diṭṭhadhamma* means immediately, *uppajja* means a moment later, and *aparapariyāya* means some time later, that is, after the second birth, third birth, fourth birth, etc. in the meaning of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, which could be in the same hour, or the same day, or even years later. Still, all of these timeframes are within the same individuality (appearances of self). There is no need to interpret this in terms of happening after death, as is so often understood. It is not necessary to speak of after death, because in just this life, individuality, there are hundreds, thousands, dozens of thousands, or millions of births for us to act and experience the fruits of action. Please consider the meaning of birth correctly in line with the language intention of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, that is, the language of ultimate truth, as we are doing here. Even though the language of *śīladhamma* (ethics) used in teaching ethics speaks of recollecting countless past lives, that can be understood in the language of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, also. Thus, isn't it time that we understand the meaning of the terms *jāti*, *diṭṭhadhamma*, *uppajja*, and *aparapariyāya* correctly according to the Buddha's wishes. In summary, *diṭṭhadhamma* means immediately and *samparāya* (which includes *uppajja*, and *aparapariyāya*) means the following time, which can be however long.

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## Karma as Field<sup>11</sup>

*Venerable Sir, what is the extent of the words "becoming, existence" (bhava)?*

Ānanda, if there was no karma bearing fruit in sensual element (*kāmadhātu*), could sensual existence (*kāmabhava*) occur?

*No way, sir.*

For this reason karma is "field," consciousness is "seed," and craving is "seed germ." When the consciousness of beings obstructed by ignorance and bound by craving establishes in a lower element

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<sup>11</sup> AN Threes Ānandavagga, Paṭhamabhava, Sutta A.i.223. Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 790.

(that is, *kāmadhātu*), the reappearance within a new becoming (*āyatim punabbhavābhiniḥḥatti*) occurs in this way.

Ānanda, if there was no karma bearing fruit in material element (*rūpadhātu*), could material existence (*rūpabhava*) occur?

*No way, sir.*

For this reason karma is "field," consciousness is "seed," and craving is "seed germ." When the consciousness of beings obstructed by ignorance and bound by craving establishes in a middling element (that is, *rūpadhātu*), the reappearance within a new becoming occurs in this way.

Ānanda, if there was no karma bearing fruit in non-material element (*arūpadhātu*), could non-material existence (*arūpabhava*) manifest?

*No way, sir.*

For this reason karma is "field," consciousness is "seed," and craving is "seed germ." When the consciousness of beings obstructed by ignorance and bound by craving establishes in a higher element (that is, *arūpadhātu*), the reappearance within a new becoming occurs in this way.

Ānanda, *bhava* (becoming, existence) naturally occurs in these ways.

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## Pleasure & Pain arise from Paṭiccasamuppāda<sup>12</sup>

*Once, at Jeta's Grove, the Wanderer Timbarukkha approached the Blessed One and asked: "Venerable Sir, are pleasure and pain (sukha and dukkha) created by oneself?"*

Do not assume that, Timbarukkha.

*"Are pleasure and pain created by someone else?"*

Do not assume that, Timbarukkha.

*"Are pleasure and pain created both by oneself and by someone else?"*

Do not assume that, Timbarukkha.

*"Are pleasure and pain created neither by oneself nor by someone else?"*

Do not assume that, Timbarukkha.

*"Pleasure and pain do not exist, then?"*

Timbarukkha, it is not that pleasure and pain do not exist. In fact, pleasure and pain do exist.

*"In that case, perhaps Ven. Gotama does not know or see pleasure and pain."*

Timbarukkha, it is not possible that I do not see and know pleasure and pain. I indeed know and see pleasure and pain.

*"Ven. Sir, when I asked 'are pleasure and pain created by oneself?' you responded, 'do not assume that, Timbarukkha.' When I asked 'are pleasure and pain created by someone else?' you responded, 'do not assume that, Timbarukkha.' When I asked 'are pleasure and pain created both by oneself and by someone else?' you responded, 'do not assume that, Timbarukkha.' When I asked 'are pleasure and pain*

<sup>12</sup> SN 12:18 Āhāravagga, Timbarukkha Sutta, S.ii.22 ,CDB 548. Translated from *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 68.

*created neither by oneself nor by someone else?' you responded, 'do not assume that, Timbarukkha.' When I asked 'pleasure and pain do not exist, then?' you responded 'it is not that pleasure and pain do not exist. In fact, pleasure and pain do exist.' When I asked 'perhaps Ven. Gotama does not know or see pleasure and pain?' you responded, 'it is not possible that I do not see and know pleasure and pain. I indeed know and see pleasure and pain.' Ven. Gotama, please explain pleasure and pain. Please reveal pleasure and pain to me."*

Timbarukkha, when someone assumes that feeling and the one who feels it are one and the same, I still do not say that pleasure and pain are created by oneself.

When someone is touched by feeling and assumes that feeling and the one who feels it are different things, I still do not say that pleasure and pain are created by another.

Timbarukkha, the Tathāgata teaches Dhamma through the Middle Way and does not incline towards either of these two extremes. That is, the Tathāgata teaches:

With ignorance as condition, concoctings occur; with concoctings as condition, consciousness occurs; ... *and so on* ... with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, pain, lamentation, grief, and despair occur; the entire mass of dukkha arises in just this way.

Through fading away and quenching of ignorance as condition, concoctings quench; through the quenching of concoctings, consciousness quenches; ... *and so on* ... through the quenching of birth, aging and death, sorrow, pain, lamentation, grief, and despair quench utterly; the entire mass of dukkha is quenched in just this way.

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### **Other interesting passages (not translated here)**

AN Fours Mahāvagga, Vappa Sutta, A.ii.196; in *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 202.

AN Threes Ānandavagga, Dutiyabhava Sutta, A.i.224; in *Paṭiccasamuppāda From His Own Lips* pp 792.

Translated from Pali to Thai by Ajahn Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Translated from Thai to English by Santikaro

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