

**Transpersonal Implications of Singing: An Intuitive Inquiry**

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# Abstract

Intuitive inquiry is a hermeneutical research method that joins intuition to intellectual precision. It consists of five iterative cycles of inquiry. It seeks to bring the researcher's inner being into the research process by placing the research squarely in the context of the researcher's personal growth. I used it to explore a deeply personal process of individuation that I had been through, the process of transpersonal (in layman's terms psycho-spiritual) experience and growth that occurs during classical singing training. In this case study, I show how I applied intuitive inquiry to a study that explored my own experience of the transpersonal implications of singing (the research topic) in parallel to, and in order to, more deeply understand the experience of other singers (my participants). I focus on demonstrating the evolution of the inner and intuitive side of the inquiry and how it shed light on the more mainstream and empirical narrative evidence collected.

## Transpersonal Implications of Singing: An Intuitive Inquiry

## Learning Outcomes

To understand

How intuitive inquiry:

integrates intuition into scholarly research leads the researcher to deeper personal understanding of the research topic self-knowledge and growth Efficacy and resonance validity

## Background to Intuitive Inquiry

Intuitive inquiry is a hermeneutical research method developed by Professor Rosemarie Anderson of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (now Sofia University). It is hermeneutical because it joins intuition to intellectual precision through five iterative cycles of interpretation. In these cycles, the researcher seeks intuitions pertinent to the research (the texts) and makes meaning of these intuitive texts in the context of the unfolding research and the researcher's personal growth. Intuitive inquiry actively encourages the researcher's personal unfolding. Anderson called intuitive inquiry an ‘epistemology of the heart’. She pointed out that intuitive researchers explore topics that claim their enthusiasm and invite the inquiry to transform both their understanding of the topic and their lives. My research was to explore the transpersonal implications of classical singing, a discipline and a lens through which I made sense of my world, and a modality of deep selfexpression. Intuitive inquiry was therefore an appropriate methodological choice.

Each of the five cycles of intuitive inquiry is an iterative and transformative multilogue between (a) the inquirer/researcher; (b) the question; (c) the existing literature; (d) the lifeworld; and (d) the understanding, knowledge, and meaning emerging from the research. Each cycle has tools that facilitate deeper integration of six types of intuition (also described by Anderson) into the research process in order to shed light on the research question. In this case study, I show how I used the structure and tools of the five cycles of intuitive inquiry for my research.

The use of intuitive inquiry is becoming more common; however, ‘mainstream’ researchers may find intuitive inquiry esoteric. Intuition takes the researcher into imaginal realms and sometimes religious iconography and texts pertinent in one way or another. The intuitive researcher's job is to report honestly on the process.

## Background to the Research: Transpersonal Implications of Singing

The word ‘transpersonal’ refers to aspects of human growth and development beyond personality and ego. It refers to what some may refer to as ‘spiritual realms’, mystical or transcendent experience, and matters of the ‘soul’ that lead to advanced human growth. When I refer to the transpersonal implications of singing, I am referring to how (classical) singing may lead to psychospiritual experience and development.

Below is an excerpt from my journal recording a ‘transpersonal’ experience I had while singing:

There is a point of power where the mind stops and one simply engages differently. Where I feel as if a lava churning abyss has opened up in me so controlled, yet so powerful; at once me; and not me; and the voice is free, yet singing from a place that cannot be moved. Hooked anatomically. Grounded and raw; sacred and beautiful; here and now; there is no other heaven.

And this all happened as I sung, and yet it was not me singing. At least not the me I knew. It took all of me, yet it was all of me and everything else. Years of work, confusion, joy and pain. Effortless so long as I was working; and I was hanging on for dear life.

And yet this experience was not in isolation. One could say it was a view from the road. Perhaps part of the road; for if not part of the road, it would be entirely peripheral and distracting. Yet there is something in that road, the sheer hard work of it all, its exhilarations and its detours that have changed me, brought me together, touched a yearning in me and taught me compassion.

This excerpt records two phenomena: the *peak* and *plateau* experience. The peak experience as described by Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, is an experience of the mystical, ecstatic, or transcendent. The plateau experience, also described by Abraham Maslow, develops from the peak experience and is a sustained experience of the miraculous, the sacralized, or union with the transcendent.

I had had a number of peak experiences while learning to sing and they had changed the way I approached the world—my way of being had developed into a more sustained *plateau*. I had accessed deeper, ecstatic, and compassionate aspects of myself and had fleetingly experienced a ‘non-dual’ ontology described prolifically in mystical literature. It was explained to me by my singing teacher (Ms Hantie Prins) that in her experience, this was tied to a ‘free’ vocal physiology: a trained, but natural, reflexive alignment of the vocal tract, where the voice, in her words, is functioning ‘as it should’, in some instances producing a flow state, in some instances something other. Ancient mystical literature described methodologies of singing that lead to profoundly altered states of consciousness and subsequently to transpersonal growth, but there is scant modern research on the topic. I wanted to know more. It was research that fitted important criteria for intuitive inquiry—it claimed my enthusiasm and had the potential to transform my worldview.

I used the intuitive inquiry to chart my own inner experience in order to understand the experiences of other singers that I was documenting in parallel. Deeply personal narratives describing the experiences and processes of transpersonal development through classical singing emerged. A winding road through the intuitive inquiry brought me to a deep understanding of myself and the transpersonal implications of singing. It also facilitated growth in some of my participants as they reported to me in communication subsequent to the completion of the research.

## Structure of this Case Study

This case study documents how I applied the five cycles of intuitive inquiry (summarized in Table 1). Each cycle forms a section. In each section, I first introduce the key elements and tasks of the cycle (paraphrased from Rosemarie Anderson's writings on intuitive inquiry). I then describe my process through the cycle. I include research results when they are needed to clarify a methodological point. Where appropriate, I comment on how a particular process contributed to the validity, integrity, and authenticity of the research.

**Table 1. Structure of an intuitive inquiry.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Cycle 1 | Clarifying the research topic |
| Cycle 2 | Developing preliminary lenses |
| Cycle 3 | Collecting data and preparing summary reports |
| Cycle 4 | Transforming and refining lenses |
| Cycle 5 | Integrating findings with the literature review |

## Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic

Cycle 1 helps researchers to clarify their research topic. In Cycle 1, intuitive researchers select a text (in hermeneutical terms a text is something from which to make meaning—perhaps prose, or a poem, perhaps an image, or an experience), something that repeatedly attracts the researcher's attention and relates to their area of interest in a general and often unconscious way. Intuition of this text is actively sought through methodologies employed by intuitive inquiry and often arises in meditation or quiet contemplation. Interpretation then begins by engaging with that text or image daily and recording both external data and data based on the researcher's inner perceptions. Repeated engagement with a potential text allows insights into converge into a focused research topic. I now will map out how I clarified my research topic through making sense of the texts that life and Cycle 1 presented to me.

I first engaged with intuitive inquiry in August 2007. I did not have a firm research topic. At the time, I wanted to understand the mystical way of knowing evident in certain writings. I went through the meditation recommended for Cycle 1. The image that came to me was a nude female torso with a beautiful flower protecting her modesty. Through contemplating the image, I came to understand that mystical knowledge is mysterious and sensuous and that it somehow involves the body. There is a femininity and fertility about mystical knowing, and it is somehow generative. I realized that in order to explore this way of knowing I would have to explore my own ‘feminine side’, and this was related to an intimate knowing and my own becoming. I would have to look at that which in me was standing in the way of intimate knowing, for the flower image was at once blocking knowledge, yet itself was sensuous and fertile.

Intuitive inquiry, as mentioned, places the research squarely in the context of the researchers' personal growth. At the time, I was working on a personal mission statement, which was ‘to connect and dwell within my authenticity and that of the World Soul, to know It deeply and to help others connect too’. I had been learning to sing for a number of years and realized that singing was one of the ways in which I go about my personal mission and that it formed part of an emergent congruent way of my being and my individuation. I was having peak experiences where I experienced mystical or spiritual knowing during my singing lessons. These experiences were changing my way of being in the world. Yet there were times in my lessons when I was blocked, could not sing freely, and did not have the peak experiences. The image of the flower blocking intimate knowledge became symbolic of my experience in the singing studio and of my quest for personal authenticity. I was closer but had not yet settled on a research topic.

A few weeks later, I repeated Anderson's Cycle 1 meditation and asked my intuition for a text or an image that would invite my attention to the research topic. In the meditation, a bodily felt sense developed around the solar plexus. It was a simple prompting, a desire to sing that was embued with deep colors of love, an overflowing of song (note the synesthesia). At the same time, there was a sense of, ‘I can't get it out’, that things (the vocal tract) were not aligned. Again the meditation was pointing me to research singing and relating it to the previous flower image.

In my day-to-day life, I found myself longing to sing but not being able to. In August 2007 in the St. Lucia nature reserve, I had taken a photograph of a baby monkey safely watching the dominant members of her troupe feed on stolen fruit. She was far from the action and too wary of the others to participate. Looking at this picture triggered a simple realization: one must show up to sing, and there are fears and blocks that prevent showing up. These were further clues to the practical meaning of the flower image mentioned above. It is also an example of how intuition, life, and the research process come together.

I later meditated, repeating the call for a text or image. I found myself singing myself into the meditation using *niggunim* (meditative melodies used in Chasidut). The niggun spirals your consciousness outward and another image came. I was driving in a blue hatchback car. There were two of me driving (I had the sensation that there were two drivers, and both were me). The car suddenly turned into jelly and a voice said, melt the vehicle and walk off in black pants, which we (the two of me) did.

I continued in the meditation and spontaneously began toning. The voice was free and light. I sang poignant melodies I had never heard before, Eastern European Jewish Ashkenazi sounding melodies. A thought came, ‘I can make these sound bigger’, so I pushed the voice and the little blue car started forming again. ‘Melt the vehicle’ nudged the imperative, ‘Melt the vehicle’.

When one ‘melts’ the vehicle one has constructed in the mind, one can walk off and the voice is free. I had learnt in my singing lessons that one has to drop preconceived ideas of how the voice should sound. Preconceived ideas of self and identity block inner knowledge, and preconceived ideas of the voice block spontaneous song (again an interpretation of the flower image). Cycle 1 was showing me what I was to research—the inner, mystical experience of singing and how this was connected to my personal journey—the ‘transpersonal implications of singing’. I had enough direction to explore the literature on the topic and engage in Cycle 2.

## Cycle 2: Developing Preliminary Lenses

Cycle 2 of intuitive inquiry requires the researcher to lay bare personal values and assumptions about the research topic prior to collecting original data. These personal values and assumptions are the *preliminary lenses*, which are developed through reengaging the research topic through a set of theoretical, research, literary, or historical texts describing the topic. Cycle 2 normally happens simultaneously to the writing of the literature review. At the end of the process, the researcher brainstorms a list of interpretative lenses (one or two line statements of the researcher's understanding of the topic) and then reengages daily with these lenses in order to draw out essential clusters and patterns.

Articulation of Cycle 2 lenses enables the reader and researcher to note changes and transformations that occur through Cycles 3, 4, and 5 of the research project. It is not intended as a means of bracketing the researcher's assumptions in order to limit subjectivity. According to Anderson, researchers instead invite full scrutiny of their assumptions and invite refinement and change over the course of the study.

Selection of Cycle 2 texts requires familiarity with the relevant literature and usually takes place within the context of an inner work practice, such as meditation, intense contemplation of the topic, or some other means of centering. I used a meditation which produced great clarity, specificity, and detail of a book called the *Original Art of Music* by Dorothy Ling, and words quoted in the book gently echoed in my awareness, ‘whether the harp had been Piewoh or Piewoh were the Harp’. They were the punch-line of the Taoist tale ‘The Taming of the Harp’, quoted from Okakura KaKuzo's *The Book of Tea.*

Once upon a time in the hoary ages, in the ravine of Lungmen stood a Kiri tree, a veritable king of the forest. It raised its head to converse with the stars; its deep roots penetrated deep into the earth, mingling their bronzed coils with those of the silver dragon that slept beneath. And it came to pass that a mighty wizard made of this tree a wondrous harp, whose stubborn spirit could only be tamed by the greatest of musicians.

For a long time the instrument was treasured by the emperor of China, but all in vain were the efforts of those that tried to draw a melody from its strings. The harp refused to recognize a master.

Finally came Piewoh, the prince of harpists. With tender hand he caressed the harp, as one might seek to soothe an unruly horse, and softly touched the chords. He sang and all the memories of the tree awoke. In ecstasy the Celestial monarch asked Piewoh wherein lay the secret of his victory.

‘Sire’, he replied, ‘others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Piewoh or Piewoh were the harp’. (KaKuzo, 2007, pp. 67–69)

This Cycle 2 text, a tale describing a musician ‘getting out of the way’ was pointing to the same phenomenon as the text of Cycle 1 and was the central theme of my ongoing singing lessons and the literature I was reading. Later, it would emerge from participants' narrative, and in Cycle 5, it would develop into understanding aspects of post-conventional stages of psychological development.

In intuitive inquiry, the researcher engages or *dialogues* deeply and daily with Cycle 2's intuitive text in personally meaningful contemplative ways, keeping it in mind as one reads the relevant literature. Through walking in nature, reading, and journaling, I dialogued daily with the *Original Art of Music* from 24 October 2007 to 27 January 2008. I would read a passage and ask myself how it may apply to whatever else I was reading, thinking, or doing at the time. Other intuitive researchers have engaged differently, for example, have danced or painted their texts to gain deeper insight as they wrote their literature review.

There was not a lot of modern research available about spiritual knowing and singing. I knew from my lessons, spiritual knowing while singing had to do with vocal alignment, so I set about systematically reviewing the anatomy, physiology, and neuropsychology of classical singing. I also reviewed the relevant literature of peak and plateau experience, psychology of music, and transpersonal development. Through ‘dialoguing’ with Dorothy Ling and the *Original Art of Music*, I was able to find an intersection of the fields mentioned above and in articulating this intersect developed a set of preliminary lenses. An example of one of the lenses was, ‘Vocal tract alignment mirrors psychology’.

Cycle 2 was complete. I was ready to embark on Cycle 3.

## Cycle 3: Collecting Data and Preparing Summary Reports

In Cycle 3, the researcher identifies the best source of data for the research topic, defines criteria for selecting and excluding participants, recruits participants, and collects textual and original data relevant to the topic. The researcher then prepares summary reports in as descriptive a manner as possible and summarizes and analyzes the research using conventional means, such as thematic content analysis and descriptive summaries.

## Finding Participants

I sought exemplars, singers who had had peak experiences while singing, but also had the selfknowledge to articulate them and understand them in the context of their own growth. I found them by following previously published research, serendipity, and by introduction from other participants.

I interviewed nine singers (six professional, three well-trained amateurs, and one practitioner of sacred harmonic chant) from South Africa, Holland, and the United States. Their internationality and sex distribution (four men and five women) contributed to the generalizability of my research. I included my own narrative, making a total of 10 participants.

## The Interview

The interview was informal and conversational. I was a singer talking to singers. This created a common ground for dialogue that enriched the data collection. Had the informal interview become uncomfortable or ‘stuck’, I had a set of questions as backup to move the interview along.

In my first interview, I initially misinterpreted the participant's pause as a signal to direct the interview. I soon realized that the participant's pause was to gather thought around expressing difficult concepts and feelings. I learnt to listen, keep silent, stay open, and direct conversation only when it was clear that the participant was ready. Interviews were recorded digitally, then transcribed, and the transcription document password protected. They took place from January to March 2009.

## Recording My Process through Art and Embodied Writing

Throughout the research project, I sang. I even joined a small group of retired opera singers and sang in a number of public concerts culminating in a recital hosted by the Danish Ambassador to South Africa. Singing is part of a greater human artistic endeavor, and in order to understand this, I actively pursued training in music theory and painting and continued developing my photography. In 2010, I held a show in partnership with another artist Michael Smith called *Velocity*, and the photographs were set to the music of one of the study's participants.

From the visual art, I learnt the relationship of disciplined thought structures and intuition. This understanding helped me understand the relationship of disciplined thought structures to musical expression, and how disciplined structure ultimately enables a singer to ‘let go and get out of the way’. Ultimately, the music and visual art came together as part of my intuitive process with insight that formed part of the study's findings. I also recorded my experience in the style of embodied writing, a method of writing described by Rosemarie Anderson to portray embodied experience and record somatosensory intuitions.

## Data Analysis

There were two sources of data, records of my own intuitive process and embodied experience singing, and participant interviews. To ensure accuracy of data and grant participants the opportunity to review their words, interview transcriptions were returned to the participants for verification, additions, changes, and feedback. I organized and summarized the data from my process and the interviews on a large spreadsheet using conventional thematic analysis. From it, I developed descriptive summaries, described by Rosemarie Anderson, and portraits as described by Clark Moustakas in heuristic research. I first worked with themes in the data and then showed how these themes played out in the participants' lives by recounting their personal stories and my own as participant researcher.

I also reported on my intuitive process. The intuitive insight itself was manifest in the later lens formation and transformation of Cycle 4 and woven into the discussion of Cycle 5.

## Reporting on My Intuitive Process

Intuitive inquiry requires that the researcher report on their intuitive process. I used a photo-essay

(see online Appendix A) to report my intuitive process and also to

catalyze in the reader, within the confines of the printed page, an intuitive synesthetic understanding of the deeper and participatory nature of singing;

demonstrate the synesthesia of singing and light as happened in my process;

synthesize and summarize my dissertation through creative expression—a device borrowed from heuristic research, described by Clark Moustakas.

The photo-essay referred to changes in an artist's experience and perception of light, stillness of the mind, a personal longing for higher perception, the role of singing, and the risk of spiritual narcissism (self-inflation through the new found perception or spiritual experience). It drew on the Zohar, the classical text of Jewish Mysticism (*Kabbalah*) to show the mystic's understanding of the generative power of light, brought an ancient passage from the Talmud that uses song as a metaphor for the interdependence or participatory nature of all life, and explained that the singer or mystic is not a lone self-made ego—that true singing happens in participation with others. Table 2 shows a few examples of how I correlated some of the intuitive themes mentioned above with interview data. The creative synthesis of my intuitive process and the research data enabled me to embark on the process of Cycle 4—to transform the interpretive lenses of Cycle 2.

**Table 2. Correlating intuitive themes with interview data.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Theme* | *Interview Narrative* |
| Light | *Rachel*: … and my body is somehow transformed into light … and yet I'm still in this physical matter body. Both are true at once. |
| Expanded perception | *Heleen*: … my voice expanded and became something I didn't know. And even the people I had sung all those years, said, ‘Where did that come from?’ And I didn't know it either. But it was as if I felt all what was about to come. And that, lived that already in my voice. In who I was. |
| R i s k o f spiritual narcissism | *David*: When I'm identified with the sound as an object, then I'm neither silent nor listening. I'm basically just you know, kind of wrapped up in that. |
| Participation in  something more than | *Paul*: The second day I was mindful of suitable pitch, the melody lifted the voice and something happened. Nothing huge, but there was a transmission of something, I could see it in the silence of the congregation that actually stopped to listen, I could feel it in the gentle nostalgic smile of an elderly gentleman as he smiled up at me while I sang. But more than anything I felt a sense of belonging and the brief |

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| oneself | presence of an ancient lineage momentarily echoing its timelessness through the tribe. |

## Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining Lenses, Efficacy Validity, and Resonance Validity

In Cycle 4, the researcher revisits the interpretive lenses of Cycle 2 and interprets the collected data in order to modify, refute, reorganize, and expand the understanding of the research topic. In this way, intuitive inquiry expands the researcher's original understanding of the topic to incorporate the experiences of others and develop new lenses in preparation for integration in Cycle 5 with the original literature review. This reorganization and refinement of lenses enables the researcher and readers of the research to evaluate change and transformation in the researcher personally and in the understanding of the research topic through the research process (‘efficacy validity’).

Anderson mentions that contemplative conversation is extremely useful in accessing and verbalizing relevant intuitive insights. My Cycle 4 took place on 2-week-long ‘dissertation retreats’ with a fellow doctoral candidate (or student) in Cape Town. Many walks along the beautiful Cape coastline both alone and in conversation about our respective research brought clarity to the data and helped distill Cycle 4 lenses.

These retreats were near to my singing teacher. This gave me the opportunity to discuss my data in depth with her and thus helped me further clarify the material and test ‘resonance validity’ from an expert in the field. Resonance validity, described by Anderson, relies on experienced readers recognizing an experience spoken by another to be true to their own experience.

## Brainstorming and Categorizing Lenses

I struggled with the process of refining lenses and then struggled with their articulation. Many lenses lay nascent in Cycle 2, some changed significantly and some remained unexplicated, neither changed, refuted, nor developed. New lenses also came to light.

Vipassana Esjborn-Hargens a fellow intuitive inquiry researcher categorized her lenses as New, Change, and Seed lenses. She and Rosemarie Anderson explained this formulation as follows: new lenses signify breakthroughs in understanding that were entirely new and unexpected. change lenses signify a significant progression of change from the lenses of Cycle 2.

seed lenses signify lenses which were nascent in Cycle 2 but which developed and acquired nuance through the intuitive inquiry.

I formulated my lenses according to Esjborn-Hargens' formulation, giving a Cycle 2 to Cycle 4 comparison. What follows is an example of seed lenses that were nascent in Cycle 2 but acquired deeper nuance and evidence. The terminology used—a multilocal participatory happening—is a re-understanding of Maslow's peak experience posited by transpersonal thinker Jorge Ferrer. Ferrer understands the peak experience as an event of spiritual knowing that happens in participation with multiple loci—other people, places, different parts of the whole human being, and Spirit. I extrapolated Ferrer's participatory language to a singers' journey of individuation.

# Example: Preliminary Cycle 2 Lenses

Singing can lead to exceptional experiences or peak experiences as well as be transformative, leading therefore to potentially exceptional human experiences or plateau experiences.

In fact, singing may lead to growth in all three aspects of the integral triad of essential, inseparable, and interrelated aspects of being human: uniqueness or individuality, universality or relatedness, and transcendence, and may lead to transformation.

# Example: Expanded Cycle 4 Lenses

Singing is a multilocal trans-temporal participatory happening, which in turn is part of a greater multilocal trans-temporal participatory unfolding of individuating spirit.

This multilocal trans-temporal participatory happening occurs in relationship with people, place, and space, and across time, manifesting as the Singer's Journey, a journey of transpersonal development.

## Cycle 5: Integration of Findings and Literature Review—Expanding the Spiral

In Cycle 5, the researcher steps back to gain a meta-view of the research process to date and, in the context of the study findings and the literature review, draws meaning from and into a larger, more encompassing hermeneutical, or interpretive circle, looking at the research findings in light of the existing literature and making new meaning from the combination. A creative synthesis or summative synthesis of the research findings is often useful. I demonstrated this process in Appendix A. Cycle 5 included further intuitive imaginal images of my own transformation in relationship to the original Cycle 1 text of the flower and nude female torso. This again was a marker of efficacy validity as it showed the growth of the researcher through the inquiry. Cycle 5, however, was largely an analytical process. I articulated a participatory understanding of singing and spirituality that was in-line with a relatively new paradigm of thinking in the field of transpersonal psychology. I was also able to use the evidence I collected in singing to expand the participatory paradigm to include the idea of participatory human development.

## Conclusion

My intuitive inquiry was a winding, puzzling, and difficult road that brought me insight into myself and personal growth that I would probably never have experienced otherwise. This insight and growth in turn enabled a deep and compassionate understanding of singing that I would not have gained with more conventional methodologies. Intuitive inquiry is not for every researcher or research project. But it is a homecoming for researchers seeking both rigor and the freedom to explore their inner life as it pertains to the research.

## Exercises and Discussion Questions

Discuss your own experiences of intuition. When and how does it arrive? What does it feel like? What kind of knowledge does it bring? Is it always correct?

How did this author demonstrate types of intuition in the research process? What information did this provide? Was it useful for the study, and if so, in what ways? How might you, as a researcher, use intuition as a tool? When might this be appropriate, and when might it not be appropriate?

Discuss the role and implication of interpretative lenses and their transformation through an intuitive inquiry.

Discuss the pros and cons of efficacy and resonance validity.

## Web Resources

Appendix A. Retrieved from <http://srmo.sagepub.com/fileasset/METC514680_Appendix_A.pdf><http://www.wellknowingconsulting.org><http://inclusivepsychology.com>

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