The Wandering Mind

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In my own exploration of practice, I found it very helpful to explore patterns and habits that arise over and over again. When we see something that happens to us repeatedly, as we explore it, we can start to understand things about it that will support our ability to further be with that experience and then deepen our understanding.

With patterns and habits that happen over and over again, we get to see different perspectives on what's seemingly the same phenomenon. It's not actually the same phenomenon because every time something arises, it's new. So as something happens to us repeatedly, we begin to see different ways it comes into being. We see different ways that we hang on to it or push it away. And we see different ways that it falls apart. Each time a pattern arises, we have the opportunity to see new things, to gather more information, to understand more deeply how that pattern works in our minds.

Tonight I'd like to explore a particular pattern, a particular habit of mind that happens to every single one of us all day long: the wandering mind. This is something I know you're all very familiar with, and yet it's not something we typically think to explore. Often we simply recognize that we're waking up in the middle of wandering, or we recognize that we've been lost in thought, and we just try to move right back. We have this idea that we need to get back to mindfulness. But it's very interesting to actually explore this phenomenon of wandering mind itself.

First I'd like to give a definition of what I mean by wandering mind. I use the term to mean anytime there's the experience of the mind losing touch with the present moment. We often think about it as the mind wandering out of the present moment, but the mind doesn't actually go anywhere. There's not actually a wandering. It's simply that the mind loses touch with the present moment. Mindfulness becomes low or even non-existent. The consciousness, the experience of the present moment, isn't being paid attention to, and yet the mind is still doing its thing—still seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and recognizing things going on. It's just that there's not that awareness connected with that experience. Our experience of this is that the mind has wandered. That's the way we talk about it: "My mind wandered."

There are many different flavors or ways that we can experience this. It might simply be a kind of drifting out of present moment experience where there's not particularly any attachment to the content of what we're thinking about. The mind has just lost its vigor or its connection with experience, picks up on something, and wanders off. There's that feeling of it drifting out of the present moment. This can sometimes be experienced as daydreaming—just images or strange dreamlike images coming through the

mind.

Sometimes the wandering mind has a more intentional or active quality to it, where it feels like the mind is engaged in thinking about some problem, thinking about the past, trying to figure out how we should have done something better, what we should have said, planning for the future, how to say something properly, what we're going to be doing. There's a little more intentionality or push to the thinking process.

This can get even more intense. It can feel like a mind storm where there's a strong emotion, or the thinking process is fueled by strong greed or aversion. This often comes with a lot of thinking. Something like self-righteousness, for example, comes with a lot of thinking: "I'm right. They shouldn't have done that." There's a strong push to it, and a lot of thinking results.

This state of the wandering mind is generally one of very low mindfulness. Mindfulness is not very strong, or it doesn't even exist—it's just not present. We're really, really lost. We can't do much about this state of mind when we're lost in it. We cannot make ourselves come out of the wandering. There's nothing we can do to come out of it. There has to be a kind of spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness. At some point this will happen to us, and this is how we notice that we've been lost in thought. Mindfulness spontaneously re-arises and we recognize, "Oh, here I am. I had been paying attention to the breath a few minutes ago, but that's not where I am now. I'm off on some train of thought." We cannot make the mindfulness re-arise when we're in this state of being lost.

It will simply re-arise at some point because causes and conditions have come together to allow for the arising of mindfulness in that moment.

In that moment of recognizing—or the mind recognizing—that it has been lost in thought, that moment itself can be recognized. Sometimes when we remember, when we wake up into the middle of wandering, we wake up right in the midst of it. We recognize, "Oh, the mind has been thinking about yesterday's lunch." When we wake up, we wake up right in the middle of that, and we realize that we had not been connected to the present moment experience. But now there is the reconnection with recognizing that we had not been here.

Sometimes, though, there's a kind of mysterious thing that happens. Perhaps some of you have seen this too. The mind can wander out of the present moment and wander back in, and then at some point we recognize or remember that we had been thinking—but we neither saw the getting lost nor the coming back. It's as if we're paying attention to the breath, and then without our recognizing it, the mind wanders out and wanders back, and we're back paying attention to the breath. Then we realize, "Wait a minute, I remember that I was just thinking about that friend of mine, but I didn't see the getting lost, or the thinking about it, or the waking up in the middle of thinking about it. Here I am, back with the breath." Sometimes this wandering can sneak up behind our backs. We can wander back into the present moment without ever having realized or recognized that we hadn't been in the present moment.

Looking at this pattern, this process of the wandering mind, can be very educational. We can learn a lot by exploring this pattern. I'm going to point to some of the things we can learn, and then I'll talk in quite a bit of detail about some ways to explore this process.

One of the things we can learn by exploring this pattern of the wandering mind is a lot about ourselves—about the kinds of things we get stuck to, the kinds of thoughts that tend to hijack us. Somebody mentioned the other day the top ten thoughts, the top ten kinds of things that tend to carry us away. By exploring this pattern, by simply beginning to recognize how our minds wander over and over again, we get familiar with the things we get stuck to. We begin to get familiar with where we get caught, what we cling to.

Another thing we really get to see very clearly with this wandering mind is that our minds are out of control. We sit down to meditate, we sit down for a session of meditation, and we have the intention to be present for our breathing, for body sensation, for thoughts, for moods, for feelings. That's our intention. Nobody sits down with the intention to space out—well, maybe sometimes we do. But mostly we sit down with the intention to be present. And we don't intend for the mind to wander. We have very little control. We have some. There is some amount of say, some connection with the process of the mind wandering out of the present moment. But once the mind has wandered, once mindfulness is not present in a moment, we have no control over when it comes back. We have no control over how long it's gone. It will simply come back when causes and conditions come together for it to reappear.

We sometimes think of this as a problem, that we don't have this control. But actually it points us to a deep truth. It points us to the not-self nature of our experience.

The Buddha describes various aspects of our experience—these aspects called the five aggregates: consciousness, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and body. These encompass all of our experience. Every part of our experience falls into one of these categories or groups. I'm just going to read out the part where he talks about consciousness, because that's what this is related to, in a way:

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not self, it lends itself to disease. It is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus.'"

This points to this fact of the wandering mind, pointing to this lack of control we have over our minds. Typically, in our experience, we think of things being mine, things being me, things being I, things being myself. And because we have that view—the view of self that we talked about the other night, this identity view—that view is a kind of belief.

It's a way that we perceive our experience. We look through this filter of identity view, and what we see in our experience confirms that identity view. As Carol was discussing, our views distort perception. Essentially, one of the main distortions of perception that we have is this view of self, and it filters

everything that we see.

Because we believe we are a self, when we look out into the world and experience things and do things, our view of self kind of self-selects what we experience to confirm that view. We pick things out of our environment that confirm it and don't notice things that don't confirm it. Or if we notice things that don't confirm it, we don't even conceive of the fact that they don't confirm it.

The wandering mind is just such an experience. It shows us over and over again this truth—it points to this truth that there's not control, that consciousness is not under control, that mental formations are not under control. But we don't recognize it as being that kind of evidence. It's hard for us to take in this evidence. It's hard for us to actually recognize things that don't confirm what we so deeply hold to be true.

Another aspect of exploring the wandering mind that we can learn about is related to this exploration of not-self. As we observe the experience of the wandering mind—as we observe any experience, actually, not just the wandering mind—we can see experience as a stream of cause and effect. All of our experiences are just arising out of causes. It's just this stream of cause and effect, cause and effect, cause and effect. There's no doer. There's no causer. There's just this process, this flux of cause and effect happening.

When we see this, when we start to see how one thing arises and that leads to the next thing, which leads to the next thing—just like dominoes falling—this experience arises, then that experience arises, and that experience arises as a result of the previous one. Just boom, boom, boom, boom. That recognition of how things unfold out of cause and effect is also another pointing to the fact that there's no one in control.

So the exploration of the wandering mind can point to things we can learn about ourselves, ways that we get caught. We can learn about how we get stuck on things, where we're particularly prone to greed or aversion around our arising experience. We can see the out-of-control nature of our experience. We can see the cause and effect nature of our experience, that things are just a process, a flux going on. And we can also, through this exploration of the wandering mind, begin to see and understand awareness itself—some qualities of awareness, how it feels, and understanding awareness as a process.

The easiest place to start this exploration of the wandering mind is when we remember in the midst of the moment when mindfulness re-arises. Typically the moment is when we wake up into a wandering thought and we recognize, "Oh, I've been lost in thought." That moment of recognizing mindfulness re-arising—that's the easiest place to begin this exploration. Developing a skillful relationship with this moment is key. It's a key to our practice.

Many of you are describing that as the days go on, as we progress into the weeks of this retreat, there's much less judgment happening in that noticing of the mind coming back into mindfulness. And that's key to the practice unfolding as a smoother and less effortful experience. When we can recognize and really accept and understand the fact that we have no control over when that waking up happens, it can help

also to lessen that sense of judgment. It's much more of a sense of celebration. Yes, here we are. I'm back again. There's not much point in judging that moment. In fact, that moment itself is mindfulness again.

But typically what we do in that moment is this: we recognize, actually there's been a moment of recognizing—I'm aware. And then the next moment we think that we've been lost. And so then we judge ourselves. But the moment of recognition has already happened. We've come back into awareness already by the time we judge ourselves for not being aware. So beginning to recognize and acknowledge what's actually happening—that awareness has re-arisen, that mindfulness has re-arisen—this is important.

Taking an interest in this moment, taking an interest in the moment of coming back into mindfulness, making an exploration of what that moment is about—I found personally that highlighting this as a place to explore in my practice really supported the letting go of judgment around that moment. That moment of remembering, that moment of mindfulness re-arising, is a purely spontaneous, effortless moment of mindfulness. It wasn't a mindfulness you did; it just happened. And it's a pointer to the kind of ease of mindfulness that can be present for us. Because we're not doing it.

It's just happening. It's nothing we're making effort to do. So if we're judging ourselves for not being mindful in that moment of mindfulness coming back, we're missing the opportunity to connect with that spontaneous, effortless moment of mindfulness. It's really a magical moment in a way, that moment of coming back into awareness.

So in this moment of waking up—we might call it waking up, or the moment of mindfulness re-arising—notice what you're waking up in the midst of. Mindfulness has re-arisen. What is it aware of in that moment when it re-arises? It might be aware of anything at any of the six sense doors. Just notice what it is noticing, what mindfulness is noticing in that moment. It might be body sensation. It might be moods or emotions. It might be planning or remembering or fantasizing or daydreaming. It might be a feeling tone.

Actually, in this exploration of the moment of waking up into mindfulness again, I found a gentle exploration of feeling tone to be a very interesting way to connect with the experience. Often, when there's some kind of mind storm going on, the experience can be unpleasant, and we connect with that unpleasantness. But a good percentage of the time—at least in my experience of playing with this, looking at the moment of remembering and noticing this wandering process that happens—particularly as the mind settles down, as there's more concentration, more stability, often the wandering aspect of the mind is more of a drifting off of experience. The energy just isn't quite strong enough to keep us connected with the present moment, so the mind loses the mindfulness and drifts out of the present moment.

Often I've seen that when I notice the feeling tone in that kind of experience, when the mind is drifting, the experience in the waking up is pleasant. Connecting with the pleasant after the drifting has happened has been a very helpful way to ground myself back in the present moment. It's actually also a bit of a carrot in terms of reconnecting with the present moment—the mind has woken up into this space of some

kind of drifting phenomenon that's a pleasant kind of drifting experience. To reconnect with what's actually happening, reconnecting with that pleasant experience... now it's not going to last. It's going to have its impermanent nature; it will arise and pass. But reconnecting with the pleasant aspect of that experience—sometimes the mind actually drifts off into pleasant, and it's not noticed that the mind is drifting off into pleasant. I'll talk more about that in a few minutes.

When we reconnect with the pleasant that's actually happening, it brings us back, it reconnects us with the present and the pleasant aspect of that experience. So that's something I offer you: just checking into the feeling tone around the wandering mind, particularly around the waking up.

Again, often in the waking up, if we wake up into some fantasy, we kind of jerk ourselves back to the breath or whatever else we think of as the present moment, because obviously this fantasy is not the present moment—it's what I'm not supposed to be doing. But when we wake up into that, can we just recognize what is happening then and there? Pleasant experience. And then, because we're no longer fueling the fantasy with our thoughts, that pleasant experience fades and something else arises. But just reconnecting with what is happening.

See if you can notice the very moment when you wake up. Or when I say that, "see if you can notice"—that sounds like something to do. But it's not something we can really do. It's much more that we can incline our interest toward this phenomenon of waking up and notice where we are when we recognize the waking up.

Often what happens as we start this exploration is that we see there's a kind of lag between the initial coming back into mindfulness and the recognition of the mindfulness. It's as if—and this is my way of describing it, I'm not sure exactly what's happening—but it's as if there's a certain level of mindfulness or continuity of mindfulness that needs to be present in order for mindfulness to recognize itself as being there. You're coming out of a daydream or you're coming out of a mind storm, and there's just a moment of awareness. Then you're kind of pulled back into the mind storm. Then there's another moment of awareness and you're pulled back. It's kind of like climbing out of mud. At some point there's this recognition: Oh, I'm back. Here I am. I am paying attention to this mind storm.

Initially there can be this feeling of pulling ourselves out of a sticky kind of thought pattern. But as we explore this more and more, as we open our minds to exploring this pattern of waking up and taking an interest in this moment of remembering...

And kind of highlighting it as: well, can I notice how soon? What is the soonest I can recognize that I have woken up? Something about that exploration seems to encourage the mind to recognize more quickly as it comes back into mindfulness. Something about that exploration seems to attune us to the recognition of that moment of waking up.

So at some point, over time with this exploration, you might really begin to notice this moment. At

whatever moment you notice or recognize "I'm back," it can be helpful or interesting to notice the difference between what it feels like to be present now and what it was like a few moments before to be lost in thought. This exploration has helped me to understand what the quality of awareness and being mindful actually feels like. What does it feel like to be mindful? The sense of presence, the sense of awakeness—what are the qualities? What is this experience of being mindful?

For myself, in my first years of practice, teachers would sometimes say, "Sense the presence in your experience," or "Connect with the awareness," or "Recognize the awareness that's present." And I would have no clue what they were talking about. It was beyond me to understand what a sense of presence meant. Then, as I began doing this exploration of the moment of remembering, this moment of recognizing that mindfulness has re-arisen, I began to recognize the difference. I began to see that when the mind comes back into awareness, there's a kind of contrast between what it feels like now to be here and mindful and what it felt like a few moments ago.

We can't really know so much in the moment what it feels like to be lost, but there's a lingering memory in that moment of remembering. There's a lingering memory of what it felt like. And there can be a clear sense of difference, of distinction, allowing us to get a sense of the qualities of mindfulness—the clarity or brightness of the mind. So our practice gives us many opportunities to explore this moment, to explore these qualities of the mind coming back into awareness.

One of the things that has been very beautiful for me to recognize about this moment of remembering is that getting familiar with what it feels like to wake up—really just that sense of coming back into mindfulness—getting familiar with that feeling begins to point it out to us more quickly. This moment of remembering actually happens to us a lot, both in our formal practice and in our daily lives. Often what happens in that moment of recognizing mindfulness coming back into being is that we experience a connection with knowing what's happening while it's happening. We see something, we hear something, and we know what's happening while it's happening. Some aspect of our mind actually connects with that experience. But what we typically do is immediately leap onto that thing and start thinking about it or doing something with it. So getting familiar with that moment begins to point it out to us so that we recognize it when it happens.

Walking down the hill to go to the dining hall, the moments of waking up will happen. This is an exploration to do also in the daily activities, in between times. Recognize the moment of coming back into awareness. It's very powerful and it will support you here on the retreat and also support you in your daily lives.

So that's an exploration of the waking up process. We can also explore the way the mind begins to wander out of the present moment. We can feel the mind start to lose its connection with experience. We can actually watch how the mind starts to wander. There are several ways that it does this.

One of the processes—and this is beginning to see the cause and effect relationship—is that often when

the mind wanders, it wanders out of some sense experience. For instance, you're sitting in meditation in the hall, paying attention to the breathing, and a sound arises. Out of that sound there's a recognition, a perception: "That's the sound of a door opening." And leaping out of that recognition of the door opening is a thought that there's somebody coming into the sitting late. And then there's a bunch of thinking that happens after that—how that person shouldn't be doing that, or what's going on with that person, or "I know that's my neighbor because I know they weren't there." The mind explodes into what's called *papañc a*.

We can catch this process in the midst of it happening. The mind wanders when some aspect of this process is not noticed. You're sitting in meditation with this kind of intention to stay with the breath or to be with body sensations. And there's the sound. Sometimes, I think partly because we have this agenda to stay with one object, there's the sound and we don't really recognize that the mind has picked up on it. The sound goes unnoticed—noticed by the mind, but unnoticed by mindfulness. When the sound is unnoticed by mindfulness, there's the possibility of that whole chain arising: perception, thought, *papañca* , all of it. So we can catch this in the midst of it happening.

willingness to recognize what the mind is paying attention to. As we're paying attention to the breathing, we have this agenda to stay with the breathing, or perhaps to stay with body sensations. And then there's a sound, and it's outside of our agenda. So even though the awareness has shifted to the sound and picked up on it, we don't notice that. It's that view again—because we have this view of "this is what I'm doing" or "this is my way of practicing," it's almost like we don't notice or recognize that the attention has shifted.

As we move more and more into just recognizing things as they are—the *yathā bhūta* that Carol was talking about—we start to recognize these subtle ways that the mind moves attention. We start to pick up on the fact that the mind is already attending to something else. That can be challenging. And so again, this isn't something so much to do as it is to just begin to recognize.

You may wake up or recognize—the mindfulness comes back into being—at any point in that process of recognizing a sound, perceiving the sound, thinking about the sound, and then proliferating around the sound. Any point you wake up in that process, just recognize that's what's happening right now. The more interest you take in the process of waking up, the more quickly you'll begin to recognize how the mind does what it does.

We can also start to notice the moment when the mind begins to let go of what it's paying attention to. This is a further refinement on what I was just talking about. Suppose you're paying attention to the breathing or body sensation, allowing your focus to come into that place. You may start to notice at some point the quality of the connection with that experience. What does it feel like when it's really connected, when the mindfulness is really connected with that experience? And then you can start to feel when it loses that connection—so that you're still paying attention to it, but it's not quite as connected. You start to notice that drifting away from the experience.

I noticed this at one point on retreat where I was really paying attention to the breathing. I was using it as a primary object, really focusing on the breathing. And I began noticing that I could see the mind losing touch with the breathing. Initially what I did with that was to notice, "Okay, the mind has lost touch with the breathing, come back to the breathing." And then I would notice it lose touch with the breathing and, "Oh, come back to the breathing."

At some point I recognized, as I noticed the mind losing touch with the breathing, that the awareness was strong—that the awareness was aware that it was losing touch with the breathing. And this recognition crossed my mind: "I'm mindful here. Why do I have to do anything with this? Why don't I just see what the mind is doing?" And the mind just opened into a new space, a new experience of settledness that I hadn't touched before.

So we can just see—if we start to notice the mind losing touch with the experience, we can use that to come back and cultivate a stronger concentration. And we can also just recognize, "Oh, this is what the mind is doing right now. It's let go of the breathing. What's it going to do?" It's an adventure. We get to see what our minds do.

So why does the mind wander? Most of us are familiar with some of the obvious ways the mind wanders. It often wanders—particularly early in retreat—because of greed or aversion, because of thinking about the past or thinking about the future. Or thinking about the present, for that matter, an endless kind of description of the present moment: "Oh, now I'm experiencing this. Oh, now I'm experiencing that. Oh, now I'm going to tell somebody I'm experiencing that." This is the most familiar reason, the most obvious reason why the mind wanders out of the present moment—because of the presence of greed or aversion or these reflections.

Some other reasons why the mind wanders: as the mind starts to relax, as it settles into concentration, as it lets go of the surface chatter—the obvious thoughts of the mind—we touch into these subtler levels, these little thoughts that come up. That can be another reason the mind wanders. It's actually because there's been some letting go happening, and we're touching into deeper layers of thought that we're not so familiar with.

The mind can also get concentrated. As the mind gets concentrated, if the energy isn't quite strong enough, as I mentioned earlier, the mind can go into these dreamlike states and images will start to appear. Then the mind gets hooked to those images and we drift out of the present moment because the mind gets hooked to images coming out of that more concentrated space. Sometimes this means we need to help bring up the energy a little bit—that kind of concentration drifting into dreamlike states.

Often just opening the eyes helps to cut the wandering in that situation. But generally, that kind of experience isn't an indication that you need to try harder.

Sometimes when the mind starts to wander, particularly at this point in the retreat, some of you may find

that you've been applying yourself and things have been going really well—the mindfulness is getting steady. And suddenly you sit down and the mind is just all over the place. "What am I doing wrong? It was going so well. I must have to try harder." Just force yourself—come back, stay with the breath, stay with the breath.

Sometimes when the mind starts wandering after a period of particular clarity in the practice, at least as I've explored this phenomenon, what I've noticed is that it can mean the mind is touching into some more subtle phenomenon that it's not used to experiencing. And because it's not used to this subtle phenomenon, it doesn't quite know how to connect to it, and the mind wanders off. So it's not so much about trying harder or trying to get back to what you were noticing. It's much more about a gentle recognition of what is actually happening here.

On one retreat, I was working with the breath, and the breath had been getting very smooth, very continuous. I was able to just be right with the breath for longer and longer periods of time. And then one morning I sat down and suddenly the mind was just all over the place. I'd take a breath and the mind would be off. I'd take a breath, okay, come back, pay attention—the mind would be off. And I just began to recognize, okay, something's happening here. What is actually happening?

That's the key—not to try to force yourself into the present moment to stay with something, but to try to connect with what's actually happening. And what I saw as I watched the experience unfold is that as I paid attention to the breath, almost immediately within the space of a breath or two, the breath got so subtle that I couldn't feel it anymore. And then the mind would wander.

When I recognized that this was the process happening, I could just hang out with that experience and recognize, okay, it's subtle here. What can I notice about that subtlety? Not to try to force the mind into it, but just to touch the experience in a light way. So sometimes when the mind starts wandering like that, after a period of settledness, it can indicate that what the mind is naturally paying attention to is a little more subtle than you're used to. And it's simply a matter of time before the mindfulness catches up to that subtlety.

So an increase in the wandering mind doesn't always mean that you've lost concentration. It might just mean that you need a touch more interest, just lightly trying to stay connected, a little bit of interest in understanding how this process of wandering is happening. Just recognizing, as I did with that example, that as the breathing got subtle, that's when the mind wandered—recognizing that process helped me stay connected to the experience. The interest supported it, and the gentle touching of the experience.

As we get more comfortable with the wandering mind, less reactive to it, we can get interested in exploring it. But sometimes we can also get complacent. Sometimes we use our self-judgment as a tool—we beat ourselves up, and then we beat ourselves up enough so that we don't want to do that thing again. That's how we sometimes work with the wandering mind. And as we let go of that self-judgment and self-criticism, sometimes we can get complacent. "Oh, yeah, there's the mind wandering. No problem."

We do need to engage. We need to engage with the processes of the mind, with the things that are happening as they are. An interest in the process of wandering itself is very helpful with this—not getting complacent around interest in what the mind is doing moment to moment. There's no need to judge yourself for the fact that mindfulness disappears and mindfulness reappears, but take an interest in what you're noticing around that whole process, around the mind letting go of objects and mindfulness re-arising. That really can help with not getting lost in the trap of complacency. Complacency is a big trap for meditators.

So I'll end with an enjoinder for interest in this area—taking an interest in this process, but not necessarily trying to do anything around it, other than just being interested in exploring the two sides: the side of wandering out of the present moment and the coming back into the present moment. Trying to do things around this exploration can just tie us into knots. Really just allowing curiosity—and that's actually what I hope this talk has done, piqued your interest around this process of the mind wandering such that you want to explore it, but not necessarily to do anything in that exploration. Just notice what you notice.

Notice what you notice. Notice things as they are. When the mindfulness comes into being, what do you notice in that moment? No need to judge.

When you notice the mind letting go of what it's paying attention to, no need to judge. Just what are you noticing? Always, always coming back to just that simple moment-to-moment exploration of what is actually happening. And from that, the practice unfolds.

So thank you for your attention. Let's sit for a couple of moments, just letting go of the words in favor of what the mind is actually experiencing in this moment. Perhaps body sensation, perhaps thoughts, moods—things as they are.

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