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Master Sheng Yen's Propagation and Contributions to Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Vinaya Studies

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Abstract: When Master Sheng Yen founded Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagushan) in Taiwan in the 1990s, he returned to the fundamental ideals of Chinese Buddhism, practiced Humanistic Buddhism, and dedicated himself to the revival of Chinese Buddhism. Consequently, he proposed the initiative of "uplifting the quality of humanity and building a pure land on earth." A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step; the realization of this initiative depends entirely on the quality of human beings. To uplift human quality and perfect human behavior, one must rely on Vinaya (monastic discipline and precepts) studies as the foundation. This paper briefly explores Master Sheng Yen's endeavors and contributions in the field of Vinaya studies through his writings and documented records. By sharing these insights for mutual encouragement, it aims to provide a model for Chinese Buddhism in adhering to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China and actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society.

Keywords: Master Sheng Yen; Vinaya Studies; Śrāvaka Precepts; Bodhisattva Precepts; Pure Land on Earth

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1. Introduction

(Introduction to Master Sheng Yen, the importance of Vinaya studies in contemporary Sangha building, and relevant literature)

Master Sheng Yen (January 22, 1931 – February 3, 2009), lay name:Zhang Baokang， was born in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, and he was the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, the founding patriarch of the "Dharma Drum Lineage of Chinese Chan," and a renowned modern Buddhist Dharma propagator and educator. Tonsured as a novice monk in his youth with the Dharma name "Changjin," he studied at and graduated from the Jing'an Temple Buddhist Institute in Shanghai. In 1949, due to war, he returned to lay life and went to Taiwan, later re-ordaining in 1959 under Master Dongchu. His teacher, Master Dongchu (September 22, 1908 – December 15, 1977), was a prominent modern Buddhist educator and historian who had studied at Tianning Temple in Changzhou in his early years and inherited both the Caodong and Linji lineages of Chinese Chan. Consequently, Master Sheng Yen also inherited the Caodong lineage from his master. In 1969, Master Sheng Yen went to Japan for further studies and earned his doctorate from Rissho University in 1975, becoming the first monk in contemporary Chinese Buddhism to hold a doctoral degree. In 1978, he received the Linji lineage transmission from Elder Master Lingyuan, receiving the Dharma name "Zhigang Weirou." After completing his studies and returning to Taiwan, he propagated the Dharma in both the United States and Taiwan. In 1989, Master Sheng Yen founded Dharma Drum

Mountain, organized Buddhist cultural research institutions, and hosted international Buddhist conferences. Throughout his life, he devoted himself to the development of Buddhist undertakings, engaged in social education and welfare, and promoted activities to purify the human mind, making immense contributions to Buddhism, society, and sentient beings.

Master Sheng Yen was a Dharma propagator, educator, and Buddhist scholar. In addition to strictly upholding the precepts and practicing diligently throughout his life, his Buddhist writings are not only prolific in number but also extraordinarily rich in content, covering a wide range of fields. These include Buddhist theory, Buddhist history, and expositions on Vinaya studies, as well as lecture notes from his Dharma talks and reflections from his international visits. He also published short essays in Buddhist magazines. Out of his compassionate vow to propagate the Dharma, he specifically wrote accessible introductory books on basic Buddhist knowledge for the general public and beginners, such as Orthodox Chinese Buddhism (Zhengxin de Fojiao) and Questions and Answers on Buddhism (Xuefo Qunyi). These works not only stayed close to the realities of modern social life but also met the needs of the broad masses of believers, receiving widespread acclaim. To guide the secular world, starting in 1993, Master Sheng Yen successively advocated a series of social movements, including "Protecting the Spiritual Environment," "Etiquette Environmentalism," "Uplifting Human Quality," the "Fourfold Peace Movement," and "Pure Land on Earth." These initiatives had a profound influence on Taiwanese society at the time in promoting world peace, social harmony, guiding hearts toward goodness, and enhancing humanistic literacy.

To realize the ideal of "uplifting the quality of humanity and building a pure land on earth," Master Sheng Yen's primary focus among the Threefold Training of discipline (*śī*la), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā) was "discipline studies" (Vinaya). Master Sheng Yen's works on Vinaya studies include Outline of Vinaya Studies (Jielüxue Gangyao), Essentials of the Bodhisattva Precepts (Pusajie Zhiyao), and Life According to the Vinaya (Lüzhi Shenghuo). In his monograph Outline of Vinaya Studies[1], he stated: "The precepts and monastic discipline are the only preservative in the life of a Buddhist disciple."[2] Building a pure land on earth requires first uplifting the quality of human beings, and to uplift human quality, one must rely on the precepts established by the Buddha. Therefore, Master Sheng Yen explicitly advocated that "to build a pure land on earth, one must observe the precepts."

2. Master Sheng Yen's Research Achievements and Characteristics in Contemporary Vinaya Studies

2.1 On the Śrāvaka Precepts

The purpose of the Buddha establishing the precepts was to purify body and mind, guide the Sangha, and lead toward liberation. Therefore, he emphasized adapting to the capacities and circumstances of those being taught, formulating precepts only when faults (āsravas) arose, and granting exceptions (kaiyuan) for the Sangha when encountering impracticable obstacles. Whether formulating precepts or granting exceptions, the goal was always to build a harmonious Sangha based on the Six Principles of Harmony and Respect (*ṣaḍ*-sāṃrāgaṇīya-dharma). Master Sheng Yen deeply understood the Buddha's original intent and was well-versed in the teaching of "relying on the meaning rather than the literal words." In his interpretation of the precepts, he did not cling rigidly to the literal text, but emphasized the underlying spirit of the Vinaya. As Master Sheng Yen stated:

"Ever since I delved deeply into the Vinaya Piṭaka and the commentaries of the ancients, I have realized that in today's era and environment, rigidly adhering to the precept articles completed in India over two thousand five hundred years ago is simply impossible. However, without the precepts established by the Buddha as living guidelines for Buddhists, the goal of purifying the three karmas of body, speech, and mind would be very difficult to achieve. Therefore, I emphasize the spirit in which the Buddha formulated the precepts, and do not advocate blindly clinging to all the literal articles of the precepts."[3]

The Buddha formulated precepts in response to specific faults within the Sangha, and every precept was conditioned by a specific historical and geographical context. Because the faults and spatiotemporal environments of ancient Indian society over two thousand years ago differ from those of modern society, it is naturally impossible to regulate the Sangha entirely according to the Vinaya system of the Buddha's time. Yet, a standard of living grounded in the precepts cannot be lacking. Thus, Master Sheng Yen believed that Vinaya studies should prioritize the spirit of the precepts rather than dogmatically clinging to the literal rules. Master Sheng Yen thoroughly examined the broad Vinayas (Guanglü) and the formation process of the

Vinaya texts. According to the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Youxing Jing), just before his parinirvāṇa, the Buddha instructed Ānanda that "the bhikṣus are permitted to abolish the minor precepts." However, there was no consensus on what constituted "minor precepts." Ultimately, Elder Mahākāśyapa, who presided over the First Council to compile the Vinaya, made a ruling and proposed three principles regarding the precepts: (1) What the Buddha did not previously establish should not now be established; (2) What the Buddha previously established should not now be abolished; (3) One should train according to what the Buddha established. Since then, the Sangha has never altered or revised the Vinaya system.[4] Mahīśāsaka Vinaya (Wufen Lü)[5]Although the Buddhist tradition has followed this precedent since Elder Mahākāśyapa, Master Sheng Yen noted that "in order for the Buddhadharma to continue to be promoted, benefiting oneself and others, we have no choice but to abandon formalistic ideas of precept observance."[5] The purpose of the precepts is to build a pure, harmonious, joyful, and liberated Sangha. They were formulated based on actual needs rather than established in advance. This reflects the Buddha's democratic spirit and respect for his disciples' dignity: only when a transgression occurred, affecting the pure Sangha and hindering their focused practice of the Way, and out of the unanimous request of the monastic assembly, were these conditions met to establish a precept.[6] In addition to the above characteristics of the Buddha's precepts, Master Sheng Yen cited the) to illustrate the principle of regional adaptation in the Vinaya system: "Even if a rule was established by me, if it is not considered pure in other regions, it need not be applied; even if a rule was not established by me, if it must be practiced[7] other regions, it must be practiced in full."

The so-called Vinaya encompasses both "prohibitive observance" (zhichi, vāritra—what one must refrain from doing) and "active observance" (zuochi, cāritra—what one must actively perform). "Prohibitive observance" refers to rules of personal conduct, whereas "active observance" refers to the various karman (formal ecclesiastical acts/procedures) regulations for handling Sangha affairs. Sangha affairs are resolved and accomplished collectively by all members of the monastic community; acting by synthesizing the opinions of the assembly is called "active observance." For example, an individual's monastic ordination requires the karman procedure to certify and confer the qualification and status of a bhikṣu. If a bhikṣu, driven by afflictions, violates a precept, the assembly must use the karman procedure to reprove, subdue, suspend, or even expel him from the Sangha. Thus, "prohibitive observance" is the preservative of a bhikṣu's life, while "active observance" is the preservative of "prohibitive observance." [8] Consequently, Master Sheng Yen remarked: "The pārājikakarman procedure is an extremely sacred and meticulous method of parliamentary deliberation," yet regrettably, the Chinese Sangha does not practice the karman procedures. [9]

Although Master Sheng Yen merely expressed regret regarding the current state of the Sangha's practice of karman procedures without elaborating further, this author believes that the primary reason for the neglect of "active observance" in the Chinese Sangha lies in the historical burden of opposing the "abolition of minor precepts." This rendered the norms of "prohibitive observance" disconnected from the actual conditions and needs of the Sangha. Even with reluctant observance, it is very difficult to maintain complete purity; if few are pure, the conditions required to hold a confession karman cannot be met, making it naturally impossible to practice. Furthermore, another possible reason is that the Vinaya inherently contains the spirit of "regional adaptation of the Vinaya" (suifang pini), allowing different regions to adapt according to their own needs without necessarily following uniform regulations. This also lent a certain legitimacy to the "Pure Rules" (Qinggui) observed by the Chinese Sangha, whereby internal monastic affairs and ethics in the Chinese Sangha came to be maintained by the "monastic official system" (sengguan zhidu) in place of the Vinaya system. As for the practical issues and evaluation of the Pure Rules and the monastic official system, they remain to be explored in future research.

2.2 On the Bodhisattva Precepts

The final section of Master Sheng Yen's Outline of Vinaya Studies details the reception, study, and practical cultivation of the Bodhisattva Precepts, integrating the Yogācāra Bodhisattva Prātimokṣa (Yujia Pusajie Ben) through the Six Pāramitās and Four Means of Embracing (catuḥ-saṃgraha-vastu), which accords with the myriad practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism and serves as the foundation for limitless Dharma doors. Although the nature of the Bodhisattva Precepts differs from that of the Śrāvaka Precepts—being upheld jointly by all four assemblies of monastics and laypeople—some precept articles also suffer from spatiotemporal discrepancies with the modern world. This has caused many believers who have read the Brahmajāla

Sūtra (Fanwang Jing) to hesitate to receive the Bodhisattva Precepts. Moreover, although the Bodhisattva Precepts are widely promoted and transmitted today, their underlying spirit and core purpose are not fully understood. Therefore, when transmitting the Bodhisattva Precepts, Master Sheng Yen placed special emphasis on inspiring the "Bodhisattva Vows," rather than focusing solely on the ordination ceremony and the technicalities of allowances and prohibitions of individual rules. During the transmission, he taught the believers the Three Pure Precepts (tri-vidha-*śī*la), the Ten Wholesome Actions (da*ś*a-ku*ś*ala-karmapatha), and the Ten Inexhaustible Precepts, enabling them to comprehend the true spirit of a Bodhisattva.

In his two papers, "On the Spatiotemporal Efficacy of the Bodhisattva Precepts from the Perspective of the Three Pure Precepts" and "On the Path of the Ten Wholesome Actions as the Common Track of the Bodhisattva Precepts," Master Sheng Yen introduced the "Three Pure Precepts" and the "Ten Wholesome Actions" across various texts, tracing the origin and evolution of the Bodhisattva Precepts by comparing their differences. Because the origins of the Bodhisattva Precepts differ from those of the Śrāvaka Precepts, a clear trajectory of development from non-existence to existence, and from simple to complex, can be traced. In contrast, the Śrāvaka Precepts, following Mahākāśyapa's conservative stance, maintained an overly strict and rigid attitude, resulting in very few changes once institutionalized. The Bodhisattva Precepts, however, emerged from the Buddha's teachings transmitted over time and flexibly adapted their allowances and prohibitions in response to changing times and environments, evolving with the era.[10]

Furthermore, the "Ten Wholesome Actions" represent a common virtue shared by both ordinary beings and sages, compatible with both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, making them the foundation of the Bodhisattva Precepts. In the section on Śīla Pāramitā in Nāgārjuna's Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upade*ś*a (Dazhidu Lun), the "Ten Wholesome Actions" serve as its outline. In traditions outside India, eminent masters of both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism also regarded the "Ten Wholesome Actions" as the core of the Bodhisattva Precepts. Considering modern needs and the historical origins of the Bodhisattva Precepts, Master Sheng Yen returned to the common track of the "Ten Wholesome Actions" to encompass the Bodhisattva Precepts.[11] Master Sheng Yen pointed out in Essentials of the Bodhisattva Precepts,:

"The essence of the Bodhisattva Precepts should not be an immutable set of articles, but rather the cultivation of a pure body and mind to increase the merits of compassion and wisdom. Therefore, examining the Tripitaka scriptures and ancient and modern Buddhist writings of both the Chinese and Tibetan traditions reveals that the heart of the Bodhisattva Precepts lies precisely in the Three Pure Precepts, the Ten Wholesome Actions, and the Ten Inexhaustible Precepts, which are universally applicable to all four assemblies of monastics and laypeople. The Three Pure Precepts encompass all pure precepts, all wholesome dharmas, and the entirety of the Buddhadharma that benefits the world and sentient beings; the Ten Wholesome Actions are the foundation of all pure precepts and naturally serve as the general outline of the Bodhisattva Precepts; and the Ten Inexhaustible Precepts of the Brahmajāla Sūtra serve as the eternal, unchanging standard for the Bodhisattva Precepts throughout the endless future. What this book promotes is precisely this kind of Bodhisattva Precept Dharma—capable of greatness and longevity, adaptable to both the shallow and the profound, applicable to both ordinary beings and sages, and uniformly taking the purification of the three karmas, the generation of bodhicitta, and the practice of the Bodhisattva Path as its fundamental spirit."[12]

From the above, it is evident that Master Sheng Yen attached great importance to expedient means suited to current capacities. Specific ancient rules may not meet the needs of modern society. In particular, the Bodhisattva Precepts of the Brahmajāla Sūtra traditionally transmitted in Chinese Buddhism are oriented primarily toward monastic Bodhisattvas in both content and spirit; the specific articles of the Ten Grave and Forty-Eight Minor Precepts do not clearly distinguish whether the recipients should be monastics, laypeople, or all four assemblies alike. For instance, the precept against sexual misconduct among the Ten Grave Precepts requires complete abstinence from all sexual acts,[13] which is unsuitable for lay believers and makes observance difficult for householder Buddhists. If they reluctantly receive the precepts and later violate them, they not only break the precept but also lose their Bodhisattva vows and faith. The inconsistency in Buddhism between strictness in conferring precepts and leniency in practice also casts a shadow over the dignity of the Mahāyāna.

As another example, the fifteenth minor precept permits only the teaching of Mahāyāna sūtras and vinayas, prohibiting the sūtras and vinayas of the Two Vehicles (Śrāvakas) and equating Śrāvaka scriptures with heterodox evil views. This not only

contradicts the standpoint of precept texts like the [14] Bodhisattvabhūmi Sūtra (Pusa Dichijing), but also conflicts with the [15] inclusivity emphasized in modern Buddhism and contemporary views on the doctrinal classification of the sequential stages of the Three Vehicles.[16] Therefore, when transmitting the Bodhisattva Precepts, Master Sheng Yen placed special emphasis on the inner essence of the Bodhisattva Precepts rather than on the word-for-word literal articles. Practicing the Bodhisattva Precepts should result in purity of body and mind and the growth of wisdom and compassion; specific precept texts can beusted in step with the times according to different spatiotemporal contexts and ideal or practical needs. Consequently, Master Sheng Yen focused on the Four Encompassing Vows, the Ten Wholesome Actions, the Ten Inexhaustible Precepts, and the Three Pure Precepts—which represent the Bodhisattva spirit—to encompass all precepts. In Master Sheng Yen's interpretation of the Bodhisattva spirit, regardless of how the terminology or numbering of these precepts adapts, they must ultimately point toward the goal of a "Pure Land on Earth" and provide guidance for realizing this goal in concrete daily life.

3. Master Sheng Yen's Propagation and Practice of Contemporary Vinaya Studies

When Master Sheng Yen founded Dharma Drum Mountain in 1989 and proposed the ideal of "uplifting the quality of humanity and building a pure land on earth," he stated:

"My purpose in founding 'Dharma Drum Mountain' in Taiwan is to 'build a pure land on earth.' These are measures to rescue the wisdom-life of Buddhism from imminent peril, and a movement to return to the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha."[17]

The purpose of building a pure land on earth is to return to the Buddha's original intent, which was expressed in his final testament: "After my parinirvāṇa, the Dharma and Vinaya I have taught shall be your great teacher." [18] Thus, Master Sheng Yen devoted his entire life to propagating the Buddha's teachings and precepts, concretely implementing them in the development of the four assemblies of disciples at Dharma Drum Mountain. When founding Dharma Drum Mountain, he took "uplifting the quality of humanity and building a pure land on earth" as its spiritual direction, later expanding this into the twenty-line "Words of Mutual Encouragement for the Fourfold Assembly of Buddhist Disciples,"[19] and further summarizing it into "The Common Ethos of Dharma Drum Mountain." From then on, [20] "Pure Land on Earth" became the spiritual beacon of Dharma Drum Mountain's Dharma propagation and the hallmark of Master Sheng Yen's ministry. In 2000, Master Sheng Yen was awarded Taiwan's National Cultural for promoting the concept of a "Pure Land on Earth," with the judging committee recognizing his contributions to implementing cultural education.

Unfettered by rigid tradition, Master Sheng Yen's Dharma propagation responded to the needs of modern society by directing religious practice toward the human realm. Master Sheng Yen held that the Pure Land need not be sought beyond "a hundred thousand million Buddha-lands," but should be striven for right here in the human world to transform it into a pure land. The Buddha said, "When the mind is pure, the Buddha-land is pure"; the concrete method for achieving a pure land on earth is for everyone to attain a "pure mind." If one merely seeks personal rebirth in the Western Pure Land while ignoring the eradication of evil in the human world, it demonstrates only the selfishness and world-weariness of Buddhists.[21] The Master further advocated that beautifying human life is the foundation of the Buddha-land Pure Land, and the Buddha-land Pure Land is the manifestation of a beautified human life. Concretely realizing a pure land on earth must begin from the foundation of the Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Actions:

"We should start from the most fundamental level, which is the Five Precepts and the Ten Wholesome Actions. From discipline arises meditative concentration, and from concentration arises wisdom. When the Threefold Training of discipline, concentration, and wisdom is complete, the conditions for liberating oneself from birth and death are mature—which is the realm of true permanence and wondrous existence, the beautification of human life.

A world of Great Harmony or a pure land on earth is a process toward the realm of the Buddha-land and a manifestation of beautifying human life. However, a process is not the final destination, nor is a manifestation ultimate. Only transcending the burning house of the Three Realms and breaking free from the cycle of the Six Realms is the ultimate purpose of the Buddha-land Pure Land and the ideal of beautifying human life. That is the Buddha-land Pure Land such as Amitābha's Pure Land."[22]

In his early essay "On the Creation and Construction of a Buddhist Life," Master Sheng Yen pointed out that although the times are arduous, Buddhism must not only face them head-on but also lead the era and guide public morals. The method lies in perfecting oneself, taking the world one inhabits as the center for creating a pure land, and thereby influencing others. His

experience of six years in solitary retreat ignited a profound sense of responsibility toward Buddhism and a deep conviction that "the doctrines and methods of Buddhism can transform the world." Sustaining a thirst for Buddhist doctrinal studies, he dedicated his life's energy to this struggle: from his youth as a novice monk, he first strove for the opportunity to study at a Buddhist institute; after returning to lay life due to historical circumstances, he found a way to be discharged from the military and re-ordain; during his six-year solitary retreat studying the Tripitaka, he never forgot the revival of the Buddhadharma; later, he traveled to Japan for advanced studies, and upon returning, went to the United States to establish meditation centers, guiding sentient beings in foreign lands through the practice of "Chinese Patriarchal Chan." Returning to Taiwan, he founded the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, working tirelessly for years to establish an accredited higher religious graduate institute under Taiwanese regulations. Later, he broke ground to build a monastery, founding Dharma Drum Mountain and launching even broader Dharma propagation. Throughout his entire life, he remained true to the Buddha's original intent, fulfilling the final testament to "take the Dharma and Vinaya as one's teacher."

4. How We Should Inherit Master Sheng Yen's Theory and Practice in Contemporary Vinaya Studies

Inheriting Master Taixu's advocacy of "Buddhism for Human Life" (Rensheng Fojiao), Master Sheng Yen went a step further to propose the initiative of "uplifting the quality of humanity and building a pure land on earth," embodying its spirit in both his personal meditative practice and his establishment of Buddhist undertakings. Looking at each stage of Master Sheng Yen's development, he played many different roles: PhD, professor, institute director, Chan master, board chairman, committee director... yet his most fundamental identity remained that of a "religious teacher" (monastic). Although he devoted himself to myriad affairs, he always kept in mind the unfolding and continuation of the life of Buddhism. Master Sheng Yen's journey and achievements offer us a model of strictness and right diligence within the Śrāvaka Precepts, as well as the compassionate, universally saving heart of a Bodhisattva. Not only did he enter deeply into the dusty world to painstakingly establish various Buddhist enterprises, but he also repeatedly looked back to the Buddha's original intent within the scriptural canon. Not bound by ancient sayings yet never losing their essence, the "Humanistic Buddhism" advocated by Master Sheng Yen fully demonstrates the spirit of "relying on the meaning rather than the literal words." We should study and disseminate Master Sheng Yen's exemplary conduct to mutually encourage fellow practitioners of like mind and vow, guiding all toward a pure land on earth.

Master Sheng Yen's thought emphasized expedient means suited to the times. Given the immense gap between the modern environment and the historical background of the sūtras and śāstras, the "modernization of Buddhism" is an urgent priority. In adapting to modern society and keeping pace with the times, the strategies and practices adopted by Master Sheng Yen exhibit the following characteristics:[23]

1. Leading from a Buddhism of faith to an academic Buddhism.
2. Leading from a ritualized Buddhism to a practical Buddhism.
3. Leading from an elite, specialized Buddhism to a popular, universal Buddhism.

The above characteristics may serve as strategies and points of reference for the development of Chinese Buddhist monasteries in adhering to the direction of the Sinicization of Buddhism and actively guiding Buddhism to adapt to socialist society.

5. Conclusion

To "uplift the quality of humanity and build a pure land on earth," Master Sheng Yen founded Dharma Drum Mountain and initiated various social purification movements in response to the needs of the era. In carrying out this purpose, all his efforts pointed directly to the human mind and returned to the Buddha's original intent. The philosophy of a Pure Land on Earth was established and developed through practice: "taking the precepts as teacher," encouraging everyone to generate great compassion, taking the Ten Wholesome Actions as the standard for daily living, living life in the way of the Buddhadharma, and building the human world through the Path of the Ten Wholesome Actions, which aligns with universal social ethics and morality. This is a Pure Land on Earth grounded in the Bodhisattva's Three Pure Precepts, and it represents

the distinctive feature of Master Sheng Yen's Pure Land on Earth. The construction of a pure land on earth and the efforts toward modernization in adhering to the Sinicization of Buddhism will inevitably manifest as a positive force for cultural transformation through the continuous strengthening of practical efficacy and sustained practice.

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