

‘Once the Buddha was a seagull ...’: Reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* as a Mahayana Buddhist Text

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In 1970, Richard Bach, a distant relative of composer Johann Sebastian Bach, published *Jonathan Livingston Seagull—a story*. It first became a firm favourite on American college campuses. From this base, the book rapidly gained in popularity. By the end of 1972, over a million copies were in print, the *Reader's Digest* had published a condensed version (Lyles 1972)¹ and the book reached the top of the New York Times best-seller list, where it remained for 38 weeks². Today, thirty-three years and millions more copies later, it is still in print. In fact, in the year 2000, the British branch of Amazon, the online bookseller, ranked it the 6th best seller in the category ‘Religion and Spirituality’³.

The impact made by this slender book has been remarkable, though not the occasion for much academic attention. Schoolchildren and students who had not even born when the book was first published have put their assessments of it on the Internet. A published author credits the book with

1 The book was even the subject of a parody called *Ludwig von Wolfgang Vulture*.

2 The only other books to reach this spot in 1972 were Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War* and *The Word* by Irving Wallace. See http://www.wcfls.lib.wi.us/mukcom/adult/adult_reading_lists/reading_lists/new_york_times_n_o_1_best_sellers.htm

3 See <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/125054/ref%3Dbr%5Fbx%5F1%5F5/202-6751837-4086248>.

inspiring him to take up writing⁴. Samizdat copies of the entire text can also be found on the Net, ready for downloading. It has inspired the production of a motion picture (about which the consensus is that the best part of it was Neil Diamond's soundtrack)⁵ a ballet⁶ and a thousand posters of flying gulls on a million adolescent bedroom walls. The Australian registry of vessels contains two yachts named after Jonathan⁷. An educational NGO in Hungary proudly calls itself the Jonathan Livingston Seagull Foundation⁸. In the Clarksdale, Mississippi school district, the book is required reading in the programme for gifted children⁹. Clearly, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* has joined Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Gibran's *Prophet*, and, for a previous generation, Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as one of those must-read books that one encounters in late adolescence and that remains with one forever.

Most interesting is the way Jonathan Livingston Seagull has crept into our language, the way it has become part of a cross-cultural shared discourse. Actress Barbara Hershey briefly changed her name to Barbara Seagull from 1972 to 1974, apparently after running over a gull in a car accident, but the timing of the name-change suggests that *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* may have had something to do with it as well. The term 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' itself has become synonymous with a certain concept of unfettered freedom. For example, an Indian film actress is interviewed and talks about her life:

The only good thing that happened was that I was free from the contract and was free to do whatever I wanted. I was a lost girl, trying to find my wings all over again. I was almost like a close relative of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, It was the first time I knew

4 See <http://www.storyman.com/st00009.htm>.

5 See <http://pw1.netcom.com/~zmoq/pages/jls.htm>.

6 See http://www.berkshiredancetheatre.org/web_pages/main_pages/past_performances.htm. It is not clear whether this ballet was ever performed by any other dance company than the Berkshire Dance Theatre, or whether the music was that of the film soundtrack.

7 See <http://www.amsa.gov.au/SRO/REG/reg23.htm>.

8 See <http://www.seagull.hu/english/index.html>.

9 See <http://www.cdps.k12.ms.us/LEAD/About%20JLS.html>.

what freedom was and how far I could fly with this great gift of freedom which I had lost all hope about at one time¹⁰.

Similarly, when Al Shugart, one of the founders of the IT industry is interviewed, one of the questions is:

Q: If you could have a talent that you don't have, what would it be?

Shugart : Flying.

Q: Like a bird, or a pilot?

Shugart: Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull¹¹.

Neither interviewee feels any need to explain the reference. There is no need to state that this is a character from a book. The shared nature of the discourse can be assumed. For generations before us, we are told, the Greek classics served such a purpose—a universally recognised universe of references that is now lost to most of us. The Bible survives in that role, though just barely in some circles. But new sets of cultural references have arisen, and Jonathan Livingston Seagull is clearly one of them. This does not imply that the new symbols are radically different from the old in what they signify. On the contrary, as Miller has demonstrated, a continuity of symbolic structures is universal to people everywhere. Symbols of freedom occur cross-temporally and, with some reservations, cross-culturally. But the specific forms those symbols will take, the images used to portray the concept, can and do vary (Miller 1981). For us, freedom is symbolised by a seagull in full flight.

In South Africa, too, both the book and the imagery that flows from it are widely available and seem to have become part of the cultural landscape. An Afrikaans translation of the book seems to have died an early death, but the English original can still be found both online and at booksellers, at least in the major cities.

Like any piece of literature with any scope, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* can be interpreted in many ways. Several early commentators,

10 See <http://www.screenindia.com/jun16/cover.htm>.

11 See http://www.thetech.org/exhibits_events/online/revolution/shugart/ib.html.

focusing mainly on the first part of the book, see it as part of that American self-help and positive thinking culture epitomised by Norman Vincent Peale¹², as an example of 'the erosion of the sandcastle of Calvinism by the sweeping tides of Arminianism' (Kuykendall 1973:182) or, less kindly, compare it to the children's tale 'The little engine that could'. But while *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* may take the form of a traditional animal fable, and can be enjoyed by young children at that level, it's greatest attraction has not been to children. Indeed, just as the fables of Aesop and the Buddhist Jataka tales were not originally designed to be children's entertainment, so does *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* exist on different planes of interpretation, of which the children's book is probably the least important. As Misra put it, it is 'a multi-level story—a story of flight in various levels of consciousness' (Misra 1981:9).

Precisely this multi-level character of the book was abhorrent to many reviewers at the time: in 1972, when 'postmodernism' was an obscure theory of architecture rather than a culture-wide buzzword, Beverly Byrne (1972:60) noted how,

No matter what metaphysical minority the reader may find seductive, there is something for him in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. ... the dialogue is a mishmash of Boy Scout/Kahlil Gibran. The narrative is poor man's Herman Hesse; the plot is Horatio Alger doing Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The meanings, metaphysical and other, are a linty overlay of folk tale, old movies, Christian tradition, Protestantism, Christian Science, Greek and Chinese philosophies, and the spirits of *Sports Illustrated* and *Outward Bound* ... This seagull is an athletic Siddharta tripping on Similac, spouting the Koran as translated by Bob Dylan ... One hopes this is not the parable for our time, popular as it is—the swift image, all-meaning metaphor that opens up into almost nothing.

One doubts that Byrne would approve, but her analysis has turned out to be almost prophetic. Twenty-first century society, or as much of it as we at its

12 Lyle (1972:1187) and Kuykendall (1973) make this comparison explicitly.

beginning can see emerging, is multicultural, tolerant of cognitive dissonances, constantly seeking new ways of re-appropriating the old. American president George W Bush, at war with a Muslim enemy, goes out of his way to defer to non-beligerent Muslims, even inviting imams into the White House. His father, at war with a Muslim enemy ten years earlier, never seemed to give it a thought. Even our conservatism now carries a multiplicity of meanings.

Today, this multiple layering of meaning, not to mention the ransacking of sources to construct a new playful non-ultimate meaning, is precisely what lends a book appeal. Indeed, there is no longer a single way to look at life, or at a book, and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was, in retrospect, a marker on the road from the 20th to the 21st centuries, from the certainties of modernism to something we call postmodernism—unless a different name comes along, of course. Fixity is stagnation.

Nancy Carter, writing two years after Byrne, takes the idea of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* as a peculiarly American phenomenon even further. She regards it as an expression of Nixon-era self-delusion that is

... popular with those who have a concept of elitism embedded in their subconscious minds, who do not want to recognise the harsh realities of a political Watergate world, and who think religion is like cotton candy—something to be bought for a price and enjoyed (Carter 1974:95).

Her reasoning is hard to follow: she makes unexplained and unsupported assertions such as that 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' stands for 'Jonathan (Jesus) Livingston (I am the way and the life) Seagull (Son of God)' and draws broad, perhaps excessively broad, parallels between the book and recent American history. In any case, we have seen above that the book's popularity has long transcended the particular circumstances of Nixon's America. If that had been the only reason for it's popularity then, we might expect to see a resurgence of interest in the book in George W Bush's America, which has seen a rise in conventional religiosity just like that which Carter describes in her analysis of America in the early 70s, but how does one explain the book's enduring popularity for the three decades in between, or in different cultures altogether, such as India and Hungary? If

we are to explain the book with reference to social conditions, those conditions will have to transcend the country of the book's origin.

Indeed, one could hardly imagine a starker contrast to these than the interpretation of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* we find in the June 1999 edition of the Buddhist magazine *Vajra Bodhi Sea*. Here, the analysis starts in the middle of the story and focuses on an aspect of the book that has not attracted the attention of western commentators to any degree:

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is a story by Richard Bach about an enlightened master [Chiang Gull] transmitting wisdom to his successor. Through dialogues between seagulls, he unravels the intricate enigma of the relationship between speed and wisdom¹³.

Perhaps this is an extreme example of how our cultural biases affect our reading of a text. But there are clear indications in the book that show how it can be read as primarily a Buddhist, and more particularly as a Mahayana, text with minor allusions from non-Buddhist sources, and the rest of this essay will explore this way of reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. This does not imply that Richard Bach was a Buddhist (in fact, he seems to have been a Christian Scientist at the time), or that he consciously set out to write a *sutra*. There is a persistent urban legend that Richard Bach did not actually write the book, but that it was dictated to him by a disembodied voice. Of course there is a contradictory myth that the book was rejected by over thirty publishers and was continually edited during this time¹⁴, but this kind of playful contradiction, as we have seen above and shall see again, is the stuff on which *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, character and book alike, thrive. Taken together, these stories indicate that the *zeitgeist* was ready for this kind of book to appear, for the ideas in it to spread though western society. The seventies were a time of unprecedented growth for Buddhism outside Asia, and the book is a reflection of the greater social, religious and philosophical trends that made both western Buddhism and the publication

13 See <http://www.drba.org/BTTS/VBS/VBS349/vbs349p40.html>.

14 Cf. Avramenko (1998). The truth of these stories could not be ascertained. Bach himself lives in seclusion at the time of writing and has even shut down his website.

of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* possible. Reading the book in this way gives it even more of that multiplicitous width that the reviewers of the early 1970s found so problematic.

When we approach *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* from a Buddhist perspective, the first thing that stands out is its division into three sections, each of which closely approximates a specific level of understanding and attainment in the Buddhist tradition. In fact, the first section tails off into a separate subsection that deserves consideration in its own right, and to a certain degree, so does the second. This gives us three major sections and two minor, intermediary parts. Together, these five sections can be seen as a Buddhist 'pilgrim's progress', a movement from the initial impulse to seek for something special called enlightenment to the final realisation that even enlightenment itself is nothing special. The tale of Jonathan is the tale of the Buddha. We could do worse than to label these sections according to the kind of Buddhism they represent.

Hinayana

We start with our feet firmly planted in *samsara*, the everyday world of physical reality: 'A mile from shore a fishing boat churned the water ... a thousand seagulls came to dodge and fight for bits of food'¹⁵. Things are as they seem—rivers are rivers, and mountains are mountains. But already Jonathan is showing the first signs of his ascetic nature. Out by himself, he is practising flight. Like a Buddhist meditator concentrating on her breathing, like a monk placing total concentration on each footstep, he seeks perfection in precisely the most mundane of all activities his body is capable of. Which, for a gull, is flying. Conventional values are inverted as the instrumental action is assigned ultimate value, the most valued of *samsaric* actions are deprecated, and the quest for perfection slowly takes precedence over all else.

Unlike the Buddha, Jonathan does not need to sneak away from his flock in the middle of the night: he is expelled in a ceremony of public humiliation after he

15 All quotations from Bach (1973). Considering how short *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is, no page references will be given.

fired directly through the centre of Breakfast Flock, ticking off two hundred twelve miles per hour, eyes closed, in a great roaring shriek of wind and feathers.

Unlike the Buddha, Jonathan does not encounter old age, sickness and death: the epiphanies that inspire him concern discoveries of excellence rather than decrepitude. Nevertheless, there are similarities. Like the Buddha, Jonathan decides to teach his fellow gulls that there is a higher purpose to life. But they, as the Buddha too would consider, have sand in their eyes and food on their mind. His banishment turns him into the equivalent of the solitary hermit who, as the *Sutta Nipata* says, dwells as solitary as the rhinoceros. He flies away and ironically enough, finds that his superior flying skills guarantee him a better diet than the gulls of the flock could ever find. But that is secondary: there is always the urge to learn even more about flying.

By the end of Part One, Jonathan has ended up as the *Pratekyabuddha*, the silent Buddha who knows but does not teach. But this was hardly his doing: a younger Jonathan had been desperate to share his insights, but had been firmly rebuffed by his flock. His compassion having fallen on barren rock, he had no choice but to advance in wisdom first.

Even so, from the Mahayana Buddhist point of view, Part One is excessively concerned with technique, with progress, with ego. It is a text that breathes the spirit of *Hinayana*, of the 'small vehicle' where the practitioner is far too much concerned with perfecting the 'self' for the sake of the 'self'. I use the term 'Hinayana' here not in the usual sectarian way, as a vaguely derogatory reference to the extant Theravada school, but in the spirit of texts such as the *Lotus Sutra*, where it refers to an individual's level of aspiration, not to the particular institution to which he or she belongs. A Theravadin teacher filled with compassion could be regarded as bodhisattvic and thus Mahayana in spirit, while it is probably true to say that the majority of lay Buddhists who formally belong to a Mahayana sect have, at best, a Hinayana level of aspiration.

True, when Jonathan is called to appear before the elder gulls he is thinking that he wants no credit for his discovery, but even this is not enough for the Mahayanist, for it is still 'his' discovery, made by 'him'. Jonathan has progressed far, but he has yet to make the transition from mundane perfection to ultimacy. For that, he will have to fly into the centre of the Mahayana tornado, the centre that is a perfectly still vacuum.

Bardo

In the Tibetan religious tradition, *bardo* means inbetween-ness, and usually refers to the hallucinatory experiences undergone by a nonenlightened person between one existence and the next, between this life and the following incarnation. In the bardo between lives, the *Bardo Thodol* or 'Tibetan book of the dead' describes the appearance of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, all of which are really just creations of the dying mind, but in a Buddhist universe in which *all* phenomena are equally illusory and temporary, that is to be expected. If the dying consciousness can embrace these apparitions, can realise the nondifference between himself and all the Buddhas that ever were, rebirth can be evaded and enlightenment, or at least a more favourable rebirth, attained.

For Jonathan too, there is such a moment of liminality. No Buddhas or bodhisattvas appear to greet him, just two gulls, 'as pure as starlight, and the glow from them was gentle and friendly in the high night air'. The fact that they alone, of all gulls ever seen on earth, can fly as well as he shows the Buddhist reader that these must be projections from his own consciousness. Once he accepts them as his equals he can let go of his attachment to his beloved sky, his own attainment, and all the trappings of his ego-based existence. At last he is able to let go.

And Jonathan Livingston Seagull rose with the two star-bright gulls
to disappear into a perfect dark sky.

Mahayana

As Jonathan flies away from this earth and on to another, his body changes.

... the same young Jonathan Seagull was there that had always lived
behind his golden eyes, but ... it felt like a seagull body, but already
it flew far better than the old one ... his feathers flowed brilliant
white now, and his wings were smooth and perfect as sheets of
polished silver.

In Buddhist terms, he has arrived in a Pure Land. This is not a heavenly realm of sensual pleasures; instead, it turns out to be a place where the search for perfection is commonplace, where all gulls are dedicated to flight

and conditions are arranged so as to speed up their efforts. We are not told the name of the Buddha who created this particular Pure Land; perhaps the scattered references to the 'Great Gull' and the 'Gull of Fortune' throughout the book can serve as such references.

Jonathan learns far more about flying here, where there are others to instruct him, than he ever did on his own. Finally, Chiang the elder gull teaches him to 'fly' without wings, to simply be 'there' already, instantly: 'any number is a limit, and perfection doesn't have any limits'.

Here we start to see clear reflections of Mahayana philosophy:

The trick was to know that his true nature lived, as perfect as an unwritten number, everywhere across space and time.

A statement that could as easily have come from Fa-Tsang or Dogen. In a nondual reality, time and space are illusions that do not bind the enlightened. Realities interpenetrate each other without hindrance and there is no ultimate distinction between 'here' and 'there'

And indeed, Jonathan struggles with this concept much as a Zen student struggles with a *koan*: in order to achieve that which he wants most, he has to abandon his most cherished preoccupations. Rivers are no longer rivers, mountains are no longer mountains. Long ago, he let go of *samsara*, of the struggle to survive physically, but now he has to jettison his very concept of himself. He is no longer a physical gull with physical limitations, in the deepest essence of his being he is nondually connected to everything, 'a perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all'. If space is an illusion, then the illusions of 'being here' and of 'being there' are interchangeable. To fly anywhere, instantly, is to realise that you are already there. Compared to the extravagant miracles performed by Buddhas in Indian Mahayana literature, instant transportation across the universe is a modest achievement. But in the gull's Pure Land, it represents the highest goal imaginable.

Jonathan masters even this, the highest form of 'flying'. And he is suitably regarded with awe by his fellow gulls; in a vignette that reminds us of the biography of the Buddha before his enlightenment, he looks set to be rated as the new Elder Gull after Chiang departs. But there is yet another renunciation to make. This final renunciation is to cross time, space and old

enmities, to return to his old flock as a teacher. It is not an easy decision to make. Even after Chiang's final instruction to him to 'keep working on love', Jonathan needs to discuss it with his previous teacher, Sullivan Seagull. In a curious role reversal, it is now Sullivan who plays the role of Mara (the personification of self-doubt and temptation) in the Buddhist enlightenment mythos, who tries to prevent Jonathan from taking the momentous step of returning to earth, to *samsara*. But in the end Jonathan renounces his position as teacher in the gulls' Pure Land and returns to his old flock.

This is not entirely a new development. Even after his very earliest enlightenment experiences, we had observed Jonathan's eagerness to share his findings with his fellow gulls. But this decision to return is of a different order of magnitude. His earlier decision to teach would not have implied the drastic step of renouncing all that he had so painfully achieved. Had it been accepted by the elder gulls, he could have looked forward to a comfortable life as the flock's resident guru. All false modesties aside, it would have been a step up in the world.

But to return to the world of recalcitrant gulls after having touched perfection in the Pure Land is a renunciation of epic proportions. This is the vow of the bodhisattva, the steely determination to keep on working until the last blade of grass has entered Nirvana, to become normal again after having scaled the heights of supernormality. The last vestiges of '*Hinayana*' thinking have been discarded. He may use them in his future work, as he does when he says to his first student 'Let's begin with level flight ...', but what once held ultimate meaning for him now is as much of mere instrumental value as he once regarded the search for sustenance to be. He may look and perhaps even act like a gull, but he has grasped the true nature of reality, and combined this insight with the limitless compassion of the saint. Here, he is the embodiment of Mahayana, the 'big vehicle' that will not depart until all passengers are aboard.

Bardo II

As before, we find a moment of liminality, of inbetween-ness, between two main sections of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. In the first bardo episode, two gulls appeared as projections from Jonathan's consciousness to lead him to another level of reality. Here Jonathan himself appears as a pure idea of

freedom and flight, a thought without a thinker, far removed from the Cartesian/*Hinayana* seagull who had seen flight as an exercise in aerodynamics. This time it is Jonathan who appears to guide the young outcast Fletcher Lynd Seagull, not to another world, but back to the reality of this one, differently perceived. From a classical Mahayana position, the book's perspective now slowly shifts to something more like Zen.

And another subtle shift has occurred. Going back to teach is no longer a solitary decision, but becomes woven into the teaching itself. It is a stated precondition for receiving Jonathan's instructions. In this respect, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* mirrors the historical development of Buddhist thought. From an individual moment of insight and a personal decision to teach, slowly but inexorably compassion became not merely a virtue but a ritualised requirement; the bodhisattva's momentous vows would be routinely chanted in misunderstood foreign languages. Even the finest flash of wisdom eventually hardens into a dogma. As Jonathan and his students would soon discover

Ekayana

The third and final section of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* takes us to Jonathan's career as a teacher. No longer the over-enthusiastic would-be reformer who was once expelled from the flock, he is now a soft-spoken instructor who is capable of 'miraculous' feats, but does not rate them highly. Like the final figure in the Zen ox-herding pictures, he is 'entering the marketplace with helping hands'. He is a normal seagull again—once more, rivers are rivers, mountains are mountains—but one who has been through the process of awakening, one who sees that the normal view of normality is actually subnormal.

For Jonathan himself, this return to samsara is no longer a primarily learning experience. Now it is not learning but doing that matters. There no longer is a *Hinayana* or *Mahayana*, a 'little' and a 'big' vehicle. Those contradictions have been resolved into the *Ekayana*, the One Vehicle. It is a vehicle that goes nowhere, for there is nowhere special to go. Perfection can be attained on this very beach, if only one learns how to fly.

In the end, Jonathan does what every Buddhist teacher has to do sooner or later. He designates a successor and departs. The manner in which he leaves the flock is his signature—unlike the blinding light in which

Chiang departed, Jonathan just quietly fades away, vanishes 'into empty air'. As we can also observe in the hagiographies of Zen masters and Tibetan magicians, even in enlightenment, where technically speaking no differences exist, there is still the possibility of expressing individual styles of doing things.

His final words to Fletcher sum up his philosophy. Just as the Buddha entered the final nirvana with a summary of his teachings in the words 'Decay is inherent in all compounded things: work out your own salvation with diligence'¹⁶, so do Jonathan's final words sum up all that has gone before. He denies any special status: 'Don't let them ... make me a god ... I'm a seagull. I like to fly, maybe ...' Just as the Buddha was, in the end, a man, even if a remarkable one, Jonathan is, in the end, a gull, an equally remarkable gull. Any human being can become enlightened: any gull can learn how to fly. There is no special dispensation, no divine favour granted to some and denied to others. Some will take longer to learn than others, but time is as much of an illusion as space.

Finally, Jonathan instructs Fletcher not to

believe what your eyes are telling you. All they show is limitation. Look with your understanding, find out what you already know, and you'll see the way to fly.

Again, we hear echoes of Mahayana philosophy, of Dogen's insistence that all people are already enlightened and that meditation is a post-enlightenment exercise. 'You already know the answer' is a classical Zen non-answer to an insincerely asked question (and occasionally to a sincerely asked one!)—it throws the questioner back on his own resources, which, on investigation, reveal that there is no 'he', no ownership, no resources, only the true nature of reality, painfully obvious all along, except we all had our attention focused elsewhere.

Conclusion

When one reads *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* through Buddhist eyes, it magically transforms into a *sutra* of sorts, a twentieth century equivalent of

16 Maha-Parinibbanasutta.

the *Gandhavyuha* or the *Jataka* tales. This is not the only way to read it. When read from a liberal Christian point of view, the Buddhist elements recede and other elements come to the fore¹⁷. I have heard Scientologists claiming it as one of their own. This is one of those books that changes shape as it is picked up by a new reader. Perhaps that is why it has found a home on so many bookshelves.

One could not claim that it is a deep book in the sense that *Crime and Punishment* is deep. But it has width, scope, and above all, spirit. It may start off with a paean to progress, but by the end of the book, progress has subsided into no-gress, into the realisation that all is as it must be, and that all we need is immediately available, if only we dare to reach for it. It soon escapes from any conceptual framework in which we try to put it. Contrary to Byrne's hopes, it has indeed become the parable for our time. Or at least one of them.

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17 This is, for instance, how Avramenko sees the book: as mainly a Christian parable to which other elements, and he acknowledges that some of these are Buddhist, are added.

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