

## **Some Basic Principles of Faith-based Dialogue in Islam**

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The word “dialogue” is derived from two roots: “dia” meaning “across” or “through” and “logos” meaning “conversation” or “word”. Webster’s dictionary defines dialogue as a conversation between two or more people. In the Qur’an, the closest word for dialogue would be *Yuhawir*, in its 18<sup>th</sup> surah verse, 34, 37 and surah 58 verse 1. Here it is used for conversation between two people or groups of people. More generally in Islamic tradition, conversation between individuals, between groups, and between faiths is seen as key to better living.

Dr. John J. DeGioia, a modern western scholar defines dialogue as following:

Dialogue as the exchange of ideas oriented to action involves communication among individuals and groups, public and private, religious and secular. Such exchanges may include face-to-face encounters or an exchange of views at a distance. They engage a variety of participants, including religious leaders, elected officials, civil servants, representatives of non-governmental organizations, scholars, members of the professions of law and medicine, the business community and other citizens. Over time, dialogue within and across these groups has the potential to increase knowledge and understanding, build relationships, establish trust and foster collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

The mutual trust and collaboration among the individuals would manifest itself in many ways through conversation, interactions and discourses of verbal and written nature. The persons or groups can make free interchange of their different

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views, opinions and discussions. In the present times when the crises of nuclear power struggle and civilizational hegemonies become a threat, dialogue between the nations, religions, or civilizations is greatly needed to establish all-round peace and harmony in the world. Globalization that has become now a special pursuit for socio-economic development and inter-cultural exchange, too, cannot work properly without the promotion of dialogue.

Clearly the thrust of dialogue is not to eliminate differences of opinion and conviction, but to gain understanding and acceptance of differences. Dialogue is not about seeking the defeat of other parties or about silencing them, but about learning, understanding, and increasing one's knowledge of those "others". Thus dialogue is held so that people may agree to disagree.

Dialogue, in a way, is a facilitator for religions which helps them to be preached and practiced in a cordial way. We see before Islam, world religions were at war with each other. Jews and Christians rejected each other violently. Their mutual persecution is documented in many books of Judeo-Christian history. Where as Qur'an says:

...And remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren....<sup>2</sup>

Islam's unique contribution to human civilization is its recognition of the presence of other religions and its acceptance of the need to live in peace with those religions. Isma'il Raji al Faruqi, while mentioning this fact, says:

The respect with which Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures, is not a courtesy, but an acknowledgement of religious truth. Islam sees them in the world not as "other views" which it has to tolerate, but as standing *de jure*, as truly revealed religions from God. Moreover their legitimate status is neither socio-political, nor cultural, nor

civilizational, but religious.<sup>3</sup>

Since there is no compulsion in religion, therefore, religious belief can't be thrust on an individual, not to speak of a society. This is the reason that Islam has left open the choice for man. Dialogue makes provision for such kind of an arrangement.

Since dialogue is aimed at to search for similarities among people, the foremost similarity is that the Creator of every religious group is One. This helps them to find a common ground amongst themselves. That is why man has always tested his conscience about God, the Supreme Being, supported by historical continuity, by the application of his intellectual faculty. No doubt man's 'Inner Self' gets solace and satisfaction by nothing less than the concept of the Supreme being, but it is an irrefutable fact that he has always tried to check this evidence by his mental faculty. For this purpose he analyses different forces of nature, their composition, their function, their inter-connectivity, their usefulness for each other generally and for man particularly, so on and so forth; in all this he sees a design and a purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Since dialogue cannot take place in vacuum, therefore, it is the society for which dialogue is done and in which it takes place. Again, it is the society which reaps the results of a meaningful dialogue and it suffers if dialogue is absent. It is also a fact that different societies are bound to exist side by side making give and take to a large extent. That is the societies co-exist. Here rises the vast significance of dialogue.

Present age has marked progress in movement due to globalization. But neither it favoured, "live and let live" nor made people closer to each other. That is why humanity faces different problems, perplexities and conflicts at present which seems hard to be stopped. Generally religions are considered responsible for such conflicts.

The humanity has no option other than the dialogue to solve these problems and get rid of such a delima. Dialogue

can solve the problem i.e., clash of civilization peacefully and through dialogue the issues of religion, culture, urbanization can be solved.

Dialogue is one of the main sources to find the truth. Dialogue helps to eradicate the problems such as conflict and misconception between nations and races and faiths to make people closer to each other and united. To call people towards Islam means to show them right path and dialogue is a definite medium required. Without dialogue humanity has no other option because it proves right as right and wrong as wrong and only it makes differences between right path and wrong one.

Dialogue is considered as commendable in Islam. The Qur'anic words like *hiwar*, *jadal*, *muhajah*, *mukhasamah* etc. correspond to meaning of dialogue and discussion, conference. Now the question arises what are the basic principles and rules of Dialogue. In this connection Both the Qur'an and the Sunnah are the main sources of tracing the basic principles and rules of dialogue in Islam. As Allah states:

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except in the best way, unless it be with those of them who do wrong. But say, "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One; and it is to Him we submit (in Islam)."<sup>5</sup>

In this verse the person who is involved in dialogue is facilitated with the guidance that whenever he discusses with the people of the book i.e., Christians, Sabians, and Jews, then his way of discussion should be very polite and better and his talk should be based on commonality with the people of the book like faith in God and faith in Doooms day etc. After that the faith of Islam should be explained that Islam accepts all the prophets and also accepts the books revealed to them. However this is the basic principle by which people of the Book and Muslims started coming closer, to one another. The doors of discussion open and by this way hearts are be motivated

towards the right path. During the contention/struggle care should be taken that a contentionist should discuss with proper manner because manners matter much. The Qur'an provides the better guidance to the person involved in dialogue—And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except in the best way.

By taking care of manners and ethics during the discussion, the talk of the dialoguer becomes more impressive. However the lack of these things will have a negative impact. The Qur'an indicates the discussion between Noah (AS) and his people as following:

We sent Noah to his People (with a mission); "I have come to you as a clear warner. That ye serve none but Allah: Verily I do fear for you the punishment of a Grievous Day." But the Chiefs of the Unbelievers among his People said: "We see (in) thee nothing but a man like ourselves: Nor do we see that any follow thee but the meanest among us, apparently nor do we see in you (all) any merit above us: In fact we think ye are liars!" He said: "O my People! See ye if (it be that) I have a Clear Sign from my Lord and that He hath sent Mercy unto me from Him, but that the Mercy hath been obscured from your sight? Shall we compel you to accept it when ye are averse to it? And O my People! I ask you for no wealth I return: my reward is from none but Allah: but I will not drive away (in contempt) those who believe: For verily they are to meet their Lord, and ye I see are the ignorant ones! And O my People! Who would help me against Allah if I drove them away? Will ye not then take heed? I tell you not that with me are the Treasures of Allah, nor do I know what is hidden, nor claim I to be an angel. Nor yet do I say, of those whom your eyes do despise that Allah will not grant them (all) that is good: Allah knoweth best what is in their souls: I should, if I did, indeed be a wrong-doer." They said: "O Noah! Thou hast disputed with us, and (much) hast thou prolonged the dispute with us: now bring upon us what

thou threatenest us with, if thou speakest the truth!?”  
He said: “Truly, Allah will bring it on you if He wills,—  
and then, ye will not be able to frustrate it!”<sup>6</sup>

In these verses some principles of discussion and dialogue are made to understood. Firstly, that debates, discussions and dialogues should be only for the sake of Allah (God). Secondly, it should have strong references. Thirdly, one who discusses should take care of how to discuss and his emotions should be controlled by him even if his opposite may behave in harsh way because his work is to show the path and not to make him walk on the path. Fourthly, he should not use aggressive mode to make the opposite accept him. But he should follow *wa ma 'alya illa al-balag* that means unto us is only to preach.

In Islam discussion, debates and dialogue are liked and they are sacred that is the reason that Noah (AS) and other Prophets (AS) preached their people, whether they accepted their call or refuted it. Debates, discussions and dialogues face the contempt from the followers of Prophets (AS) but the Prophets handled the situation in a polite manner and within the principles and rules of discussion. One of the contemptuous situations of debates and discussions is explained in the Qur'an as:

None can dispute about the Signs of Allah but the Unbelievers. Let not, then their strutting about through the land deceive thee! But (there were people) before them, who denied (the Signs),—the People of Noah, and the Confederates after them; and every People plotted against their prophet, to seize him, and disputed by means of vanities, therewith to obliterate the Truth: but it was I that seized them! And how (terrible) was My Requital!<sup>7</sup>

In this *ayah* (verse) it is made clear that one who discusses should be with full knowledge and experience on which topic he is discussing should be clearly known to him. The Qur'an forbids the discussions and debates which are not based on knowledge. Allah says: “Ah! Ye are those who fell to disputing

(even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! But why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge?...”<sup>8</sup>

Because the debates and discussions which are not based on knowledge take the shape of quarrel and the result is that the person who discusses does not get his goal and is ashamed. One of such examples in the Qur’an is:

Hast thou not turned thy thought to one who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because Allah had granted him power? Abraham said: “My Lord is He Who giveth life and death.” He said: “I give life and death.” Said Abraham: “But it is Allah that causeth the sun to rise from the East: do thou then cause it to rise from the West.” Thus was he confounded who (in arrogance) rejected faith...<sup>9</sup>

The guidance from these verses is that a person who discusses should be strong in reasoning and should be equipped with intellectual references and his talk should be true. A conversation between Abraham (AS) with king Namrud throws light on how Abraham (AS) was quick-witted and he was equipped with full knowledge even if his enemy was arrogant and was trying to defeat Abraham (AS) with the result when Abraham told him that if he can raise the sun from the west instead of the east. By listening this, his opponent became aghast. In this way the discussion between the two resulted in the win of Abraham (AS).

The debates should be for the sake of Allah, and seeking the truth and this should be taken into account that whatever a dialoguer is doing, it should be within the principles of Islam and Allah should be happy with his work. Secondly, it should be not for the sake of money, fame etc. and nor it should be to achieve the dominance over the opposite. But a real purpose should be to say the truth and truth should dominate all. Whenever prophets debated they took the care of all the principles and the manners of discussion into consideration. In the Qur’an Abraham (AS) debates with his people, Allah

says about it as following:

We bestowed aforetime on Abraham his rectitude of conduct, and well were we acquainted with him. Behold he said to his father and his people, "What are these images, to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted?" They said, "We found our fathers worshipping them." He said, "Indeed ye have been in manifest error—ye and your fathers." They said, "Have you brought us the Truth, or are you one of those who jest?" He said, "Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (truth). And by Allah, I will certainly plan against your idols—after ye go away and turn your backs"... So he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address themselves) to it. They said, "Who has done this to our gods? He must indeed be one of the unjust one. They said, "We heard a youth talk of them: He is called Abraham." They said, "Then bring him before the eyes of the people, that they may bear witness:" They said, "Art thou the one that did this with our gods, O Abraham?" He said: "Nay, this was done by this the biggest one! Ask them, if they can talk." So they turned to themselves and said, "Surely ye are the ones in the wrong!" Then were they confounded with shame: (they said), "thou knowest full well that these (idols) do not speak!" (Abraham) said, "Do ye then worship, besides Allah, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm?"<sup>10</sup>

The debate of Abraham with his people illustrates that at last the nation of Abraham couldn't defend their faith. The reason for this was that Abraham tackled them very sincerely on the basis of knowledge. It is shown by this that he says them if they could protect their gods which even couldn't protect themselves; how could they protect the people who worship them. Neither they could speak nor listen to you. This was the basis of talking with the people who lacked their genuine argument.



A preacher is the architect of the nation. It is very necessary for him that he should preach the lessons of Islam with good manners, politeness and in a better way to the people who are derailed from the way of Islam. Even if his opposite will not accept him and remains stick to his belief. The dialoguer should take into his mind that he has to follow the rules and regulations of debates and discussions or preaching's because he has to give the message to people as Allah says: "The Messenger's duty is but to proclaim (the Message). But Allah knoweth all that ye reveal and ye conceal."<sup>11</sup>

It means that in Islam debates, discussions and dialogues have their own principles and rules. In the Qur'an there are two types of dialogue; first is the intra-personal dialogue that is within one self and the second is inter-personal dialogue that is with the others. The example of first one is seen in the Qur'an as:

Lo! Abraham said to his father Azar: "Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error." So also did We show Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, that he might have certitude. When the night covered him over, he saw a star: he said: "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said, "I love not those that set." When he saw the moon rising in splendor, he said: "This is my Lord." But when the moon set, he said: "Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray." When he saw the sun rising (in splendor,) he said: "This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all)." But when the sun set, he said: "O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to Allah. For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Allah."<sup>12</sup>

This is the example of intra-personal dialogue and in this it is shown that before the preaching of Islam how Abraham discusses with himself and how he satisfies himself by saying questions and gets the answers of these questions and obtains

the conclusion that the gods who are followed by the people are nothing but are dependent on the nature which is hidden in the universe and has a control over all the universe. The nation of Abraham (AS) were Sabeans who worshipped stars, sun and moon but Abraham with his knowledge and power of thinking rejects their faith and makes the conclusion that the whole universe is controlled by Allah with His power even if there is no concrete appearance of Allah but His existence is evident. However when the dialogue and discussion reached the end it concluded by saying humans should follow only Allah and nothing should be regarded as the associate of Allah. The conclusion from these verses are that a dialoguer should first convince himself with the fact that he has full faith in Allah and when he discusses with the others he should have the confidence, knowledge and belief.

The second type of dialogue is inter-personal and its examples are many. One of the best examples of this type of dialogue is seen in surah kahaf in which the debate between Musa (AS) and Khidr (AS) is given:

So they found one of Our servants. On whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence. Moses said to him: "May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?" (The other) said: "Verily thou wilt not be able to have patience with me! For how canst thou have patience about things which are beyond your knowledge?" Moses said: "Thou wilt find me, if Allah so will, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey thee in aught." The other said: "If then thou wouldst follow me, ask me no question about anything until I myself speak to thee concerning it." So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: "Hast thou scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing hast thou done!" He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?" Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising

difficulties in my case.” Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young boy, he slew him. Moses said: “Hast thou slain an innocent person who had slain none? Truly a foul (unheard-of) thing hast thou done!” He answered: “Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?” (Moses) said: “If ever I ask thee about anything after this, keep me not in thy company: then wouldst thou have received (full) excuse from my side. Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight. (Moses) said: “If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!” He answered: “This is the parting between me and thee: now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience.<sup>13</sup>

In this way the nature of debates and discussions gets amplified. By these incidences we understand that whenever two persons want to discuss on something, then it is necessary for both of them that they should have profound knowledge for that, otherwise the situation arises as the situation between Moses (AS) and Khidr (AS) arose that the things about which Moses (AS) had not any knowledge and Khidr (AS) was bestowed with the knowledge which is imparted directly from Allah (God). Khidr (AS) was having this knowledge. The discussion reached to an end very quickly and Moses could not get much advantage from the knowledge which Khidr (AS) was having about these things. Thus we get the reference that the dialogue and discussions between two persons should be within the principles and rules of discussion. If one group loses his patience and works with his emotions then the discussion or dialogue will be fruitless. By this we come to know that the person who discusses with the opposite should have near equivalent knowledge so that when they discuss their should be no confusion and doubt. Moreover the persons who

participate in discussion with each other they should wait for their turn to talk otherwise it will become mess of talks without any climax.

One of the basic principles of dialogue is that preacher should never compromise or favour a particular concept. But he should be clear whether it favours someone or opposes. There are so many incidents of Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) life where it has been cleared. One of the famous incident is that when the leaders of Quraish felt helpless because of Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) religious struggle they decided to go to Abu Talib, uncle of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) to fight against the revolutionary message of invitation of Islam which was impacting from every side.

When the heads of the Quraish were continuously fed up with the religious sermons of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and to curb the revolutionary fervor of Islam they came to Abu Talib and asked him, "O! Abu Talib make your nephew understand that he had troubled us. You have to stop him from his deeds by any means". The conversation after wards, which took between prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and his uncle that is worth mentioning in golden words in history. Abu Talib said, "Oh boy! Your people had come to me and went away expressing such and such words. Now don't throw your life as well as mine in difficulty and don't indulge you and me in such trouble which we can not bear. Just stop doing such activity for which you are fully determined." Then Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said to his uncle, "Oh uncle! If they will keep the sun on my right hand and moon at left hand, still I would not keep behind from this activity. Whether Allah will make me successful or will end my life." This conversation of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) with Abu Talib indicates and explains that while giving the message of truth the preacher or dialoguer should not use concealing language but should be determined and clear in his presentation of truth. The main purpose of the preacher or dialoguer is to talk truthfully and just expose the

truth for which he should not show any deviation. This conversation shows us the politeness with determination of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS). Instead of emotional blackmailing Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) categorically said in his determined words that now this work will definitely be carried to an end whether he had to give his life for it. This closed all the doors for his addressees to make prophet Muhammad (SAAS) any compromise in religion, belief and his faith in Allah. This Hadith further enlightens also that the preacher should always seek Allah's help. This is the way which will make him more determinant and firm in his mission.

Although dialogue and peace making and reconciliation is inspired in Islam but as far as the faith or beliefs are concerned one can not be lenient in this matter. Though Muslims can tolerate any worldly loss to them or to their material possession, as is evident from the treaty of Hudaibiyah. No matter, if at some stage dialogue process will collapse, since then Muslims are not allowed to compromise with their faith which stand above all.

There was a time in Makkah when although a storm of opposition had arisen in the pagan society of Quraish against the message of Islam preached by prophet Muhammad (SAAS), the Quraish chiefs had not yet lost hope that they would reach some sort of a compromise with him. Therefore, from time to time they would visit him (SAAS) with different proposals of compromise so that he may accept compromise and the dispute between them may end. In this connection, various traditions have been related in the Ahadith collection:

Walid bin Mughirah, As bin Wa'il, Aswad bin al-Muttalib and Umayyah bin Khalaf met the Prophet and said to him: "O Muhammad, let us agree that we would worship your God and you would worship our gods, and we would make you a partner in all our works. If what you have brought was better than what we possess, we would be partners in it with you, and have our share in

it, and if what we possess is better than what you have brought, you would be partner in it with us and have your share of it.” At this Allah sent down: Qul ya Ayyuhal Kafirun.<sup>14</sup>

Ibn Jarir, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Hisham also have related this later event in the *Sirah* (Biography of prophet Muhammad).

Because of these repeated dialogues, there was a need that the Quraish be given a definite, decisive reply so that their hope of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) coming to terms with them on the principle of “give and take” would be frustrated for ever. Therefore, Almighty Allah commanded His messenger, Muhammad (SAAS) as following:

Say: O ye that reject Faith! I worship not that which ye worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your Way, and to me mine.<sup>15</sup>

The above examples, illustrate the guiding principles of dialogue or discussion in Islam. These are the milestones to make the human beings closer to one another enabling for their mutual better understanding and social integration.

Any concept or thought should have a specified aim and purpose and dialogue, indeed, has a lofty one (purpose). Human society needs cordiality and togetherness which can be had through dialogue. It is so because Islam advocates making acquaintance with others. In other words it calls upon people to meet each other, to live together and to give and take whatever is useful according to the needs of each other. Thus it advocates coexistence, with all the giving and taking that it involves and also the lasting mutual influence, avoiding all racial chauvinism, regional discrimination and cultural arrogance. Thus, Islam does not recognize any reason why one may be considered superior to the other, except in faith.

And so far as the case of faith is concerned, it is a thing that people must choose for themselves. That is why Allah has

not forced anyone to be a true believer and has given him the free will to choose between various options. The Qur'an says:

Say, "The Truth is from your Lord" let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)....<sup>16</sup>

To achieve this end, "follow your way and let others to follow their ways" is the required principle which would bring forth cordiality and tolerance. As such by knowing and respecting each other through dialogue and communication, societies can avoid mistrust, overcome differences, and establish harmonious relations.

Since dialogue involves different individuals or a group of individuals who try to understand each others' position regarding their religio-cultural positions, it needs certain rules and a special ethics. Different scholars have highlighted the basic ethics for a person who is interested in a purposeful dialogue. Isma'il R.al-Faruqi, for example, has set the following set of rules:

- No religious pronouncement is beyond the reach of criticism.
- Internal coherence must exist.
- Proper historical perspective must be maintained.
- Correspondence with reality must exist.
- Freedom from absolutized scriptural interpretations.
- Dialogue should be carried in areas where there is a greater possibility of success, e.g. in the field of ethical duties.<sup>17</sup>

Certain other norms could, however, be added to the list. These can be politeness and gentility, speaking softly, not speaking ill of others, avoiding direct criticism of others, not compromising on the basic principles of one's faith, suppressing anger, observing patience, giving humane treatment, smiling and laughing gently, attending to the speaking person, alertness, avoiding continuous speaking, readiness to community work, punctuality and cleanliness.<sup>18</sup> These can make a dialogue successful and purposeful.

Whatever the results, positive or negative of dialogue, different religious communities however, can never reach a stage when there will be no differences and all humans will have just one faith or worldview. Difference is also in the nature of humans. Holders of any view believe that the truth lies with them (why else would they hold that view?). It is the dialogue that helps each differing group to contemplate upon and examine its beliefs and change its position, if convinced of the truth of its opponent.

Nevertheless, there are negative aspects of dialogue which could not be underestimated. Most of these arise because dialogue is a cloistered activity carried on by the elitists of different religious groups and those elitists have no (or negligible) influence at the grass root level. That is why they are neither able to implement the results of dialogue nor are they in a position to purge the society of the activities and behavior which challenge the whole process of dialogue. Speaking upon the narrow efficacy of dialogue and the way how its spectrum of influence could be broadened, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi says:

No dialogue can succeed where one party is "host" and the others are "invited guests". Each party must be host and feel itself so. Every party must feel absolutely free to speak its own mind, free of both burdens at once: that of obligation to the other party, as well as that of loyalty to one's organization or government. There can be no "upper hand" and "lower hand" in dialogue; all "hands" must be equal. Moreover, candid respect of the other faiths by each party is equally a necessity.<sup>19</sup>

Dialogue, however, is never totally irrelevant. Human nature demands that they talk to each other and try to settle out differences through dialogue instead of using force. So when dialogue among the people or nations or faiths is promoted honestly and extensively, it will definitely succeed in bringing nations and faiths closer to one another and contribute positively to the alliance of civilizations.



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