


UNITED WISDOM

# Thinking in Circles: When New Thoughts Bring No New Information

Human and Inner World

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# Thinking in Circles: When New Thoughts Bring No New Information

> *“Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous.”*

Confucius, The Analects II.15, translated by James Legge.

## What this article is about

Imagine someone who has spent three weeks of evenings deciding whether to leave their job. Each evening they go over the same arguments: the pay is lower than they would like; the team is good; a new place is frightening because it is unknown. By midnight they are tired, postpone the decision until tomorrow, and wake up with the same heaviness as a week before. It feels as though they have been thinking a great deal. Yet if we asked what they have learned in those three weeks, the answer would be short: almost nothing.

This article is about the difference between deliberation that moves a person forward and thinking in circles. We propose a working criterion: a round of thought is useful as long as it changes something, that is, as long as it brings a new fact, a testable assumption, a new option or a decision about the next step. To test the criterion we turn to psychological research on rumination, to John Dewey and Aristotle, and to several religious and philosophical traditions, each with its own context and its own differences. The everyday scenes in the text are hypothetical examples written by the authors. The article makes no diagnoses and does not replace professional help; when such help is needed is discussed separately.

## I. Repetition alone is not yet a circle

Returning to a difficult question is normal. Serious decisions are rarely made in one sitting: we gather information, ask for advice, and check our feelings the next day. The mere fact that a thought comes back therefore says nothing about its quality. What matters is what happens between the returns.

Let us separate a few words. In this article, reflection means deliberation aimed at understanding and testing: a person looks for grounds, compares options and notices what they do not know. Psychologists use rumination for repetitive, stuck thinking, most often about an unpleasant experience, its causes and its meaning. Worry faces the future and sounds like an endless "what if". All three can concern the same subject and can even sound alike. They differ not in their topic but in their movement.



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Back to our example. On the first evening, listing the arguments really helps: for the first time the person puts into words what does not suit them. On the second evening they may notice that they do not know the main thing, namely what similar work actually pays. If on the third evening they still do not know it, yet weigh the same three arguments again, deliberation has changed its function. It no longer looks for information; it keeps the uncertainty alive.

Hence the first question, which we will refine throughout the article: what has changed since the last round? Not the mood, which changes all the time, but the content. Has a new fact appeared, an assumption that can be tested, a new course of action, or a decision about the next step? If several rounds have produced none of these, what is probably needed is not one more thought but a different step.

The criterion is modest. It does not say how long it is right to think, and it does not divide people into reflectors and ruminators. It moves the question from the quality of the person to the quality of the process, and a process can be observed and changed.

## II. What can be seen from outside: change in the story

Can the difference between reflection and rumination be noticed from outside as well as from within? One study offers a partial answer. Tilmann Habermas and colleagues (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021) selected 94 people from 492 students so that their tendencies differed as much as possible: towards rumination, towards adaptive reflection, or towards little of either. Participants gave oral accounts of unpleasant experiences (being disappointed in oneself, having harmed someone, being rejected) and of two events important to their sense of self. Habermas et al., 2021.

The authors start from the view that ruminative reasoning is “inconclusive, repetitive, and usually regards negative thoughts”. Comparing the accounts, they found that reflectors more often produced what are called innovative moments: statements that something in an earlier problem had changed. Yet the relative frequency of autobiographical reasoning, that is, of links between an event and the rest of one's life or one's character, did not differ between the groups. Such reasoning, the authors suggest, can be used “circularly, vaguely, and inconclusively” as well as productively.

For our subject this is an important observation. The difference lies not in how much a person reasons but in whether change appears in the reasoning. Someone who thinks in circles may reason a great deal. One more detail is worth noting: the mood of participants in all three groups improved equally after telling their stories to an attentive listener, even though the mood of those prone to rumination was worse both before and after.

At the end of the paper the authors put forward a suggestion that still needs testing: rumination may show in a narrative as a lack of event sequences, as questions that do not lead to

answers, as the repetition of the same arguments, and as inconclusiveness. We use this list as a guide for self-observation, not as a validated test.

The study's limitations are substantial. The sample was non-clinical, ruminative tendencies among the participants were weak, groups were formed on the basis of self-report, and the rumination and reflection scales correlated with each other. This is a single correlational study; it does not show that a person will stop ruminating by starting to talk about change. But it supports the criterion from the first section: what matters is not the amount of thinking but the appearance of something new.

## III. Dewey: thought begins with a difficulty and is tested by observation

In How We Think (1910), the American philosopher John Dewey gave a definition that rewards rereading. Reflective thought, for Dewey, is “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends”. The key words are grounds and conclusions. Thought that seeks no grounds and tests no consequences is not yet reflection by this definition. Dewey, How We Think.

Dewey also names what steers the whole process: the need to resolve a difficulty. Where there is no problem to be solved, the course of suggestions, in his words, “flows on at random”. Thinking in circles often looks exactly like this: the topic stays the same, but no question has been set. The person is thinking about work in general rather than about a question that can be answered.

In his sixth chapter Dewey describes five logically distinct steps of a complete act of thought: “(i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestion of possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection”. Laid over our example, the scheme shows where the circle breaks. The difficulty is felt acutely. Suggestions arise constantly. Their consequences are discussed every evening. But the second step, defining the problem precisely, has been skipped, and the fifth, observation and testing, never begins.

Dewey also values the ability not to hurry towards a conclusion. For him, the essence of critical thinking is to suspend judgment while investigating the nature of the problem; the exact passage appears in the key quotation below. Suspended judgment in Dewey's sense is active: a person does not decide because they are finding out. In the circle, a person does not decide because they are finding nothing out.

The difference is easy to test. It is enough to ask: what observation or what fact would change my mind? If there is an answer, the fact can be obtained. If there is none, the question may not yet be defined, and the work begins with Dewey's second step rather than with another round of weighing.

## IV. Aristotle: we deliberate about what is in our power

Long before the psychology of rumination, Aristotle asked what it makes sense to deliberate about when action is required. In Book III of the Nicomachean Ethics he answers that deliberation concerns what can be done by our own efforts, and concerns means rather than ends. A physician does not deliberate whether to cure, nor an orator whether to persuade; they deliberate how and by what means to reach the end. In D. P. Chase's translation, deliberation has for its object “whatever may be done through one’s own instrumentality”. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III.

Aristotle compares deliberation to solving a geometrical problem: step by step one traces the end back to the means until one reaches something that can be started. Then, in his words, “the last step in the analysis is the first in the constructive process”. Deliberation is complete when an action has been found that can begin now. And if in the course of the search people come upon something impossible, Aristotle notes, they give the plan up.

Another of his remarks bears directly on our subject. Not everything is a matter for deliberation: whether the thing before me is bread, or whether it has been properly baked, is settled by perception, not by reasoning. Otherwise, Aristotle writes, “if a man is to be always deliberating, he may go on ad infinitum”. Some questions are closed not by thought but by a look, a trial, or a question put to someone who knows.

Back to the job example. What another company would offer is not settled by evening reflection; an application or a conversation with someone who hires settles it. Whether the project that makes staying worthwhile will survive is settled by a conversation with one's manager. Deliberation in Aristotle's sense points to such actions; it should not replace them.

This support has a limit. Aristotle writes about the ethics of choice and virtue, not about the psychology of intrusive thoughts, and his scheme assumes that the end is already clear. Often a circle arises precisely because a person does not know what they want, and then the end itself becomes the subject of reflection, which is a separate conversation. Still, the distinction between what is and is not in our power, and the idea that deliberation ends with a first step, remain useful to a modern reader.

## V. Delay does not make a decision more accurate by itself

A common justification of the circle runs: "I will think a little longer and the decision will ripen." Sometimes that is true, and the next section deals with it. But there is evidence that time alone does not improve a decision and may even make it worse, while preserving a feeling of confidence.

José Mauro C. Hernandez and colleagues (Judgment and Decision Making, 2023) ran three experiments on consumer choice. Participants first learned about a product and then chose from an incompletely described set, either immediately or a week later. Those whose choice was delayed were worse at noticing that important information was missing, felt more confident, and deferred their choice less often. The authors link this to what they call “omission neglect”, “an inability to detect missing information and form extreme and confidently held judgments”. Hernandez et al., 2023.

The mechanism makes sense outside the shop too. While information is fresh, we can see what it lacks. A week later the details have faded, but the overall impression remains and seems more complete than it was. So a resolution to think about it later, with no notes and no specific question, risks producing not a ripened choice but a confident impression.

These results should be transferred to life decisions with care. The experiments concerned purchases, incompletely described products and a delay of one week; the study does not extend to choosing a job, a partner or a place to live. But it undermines the convenient assumption that time by itself makes deliberation better.

For our example, one simple thing follows. If the person has learned something important about pay, the project or deadlines, it is worth writing it down at once, together with a list of what they do not yet know, and setting a day by which the decision will be made or the next step taken. The delay then becomes part of a plan rather than a way of not deciding.

## VI. An objection: sometimes the new arrives when we stop thinking

There is a strong objection to the criterion of new information. Many people know from experience that a solution can arrive in the shower, on a walk, or after sleep. Psychologists call this the incubation effect: the benefit of setting a problem aside for a while.

In a review of research on creative problem solving, Kenneth Gilhooly (Frontiers in Psychology, 2016) cites a meta-analysis by Sio and Ormerod (2009) covering 117 studies. A positive effect of delayed incubation, a break after a period of work on the problem, was confirmed, but the average effect size fell in the low-to-medium band (d = 0.29). The same meta-analysis found that the break helps more when people are occupied with an undemanding task than when

they work on a demanding one or do nothing at all. Gilhooly himself leans towards an explanation in terms of unconscious work during the break. Gilhooly, 2016.

The objection matters, but it refines the criterion rather than cancelling it. Incubation means putting a problem aside, not continuing to chew on it. Its benefit has been described for a break after working on a problem, not instead of the work. And what arrives after the break, a new idea or a new option, is exactly what this article means by new information.

The evidence has a limit. Incubation has been studied with laboratory tasks, such as finding unusual uses for objects or solving insight problems. Gilhooly states plainly that the explanation still needs to be developed for larger real-life problems. The review therefore does not show that any difficult decision will ripen if it is put off.

Finally, not every return to the past is a problem to be solved. Living through a loss or a hard event may involve returning to the same memories many times. We do not regard this as an error of reasoning and do not apply the criterion of new information to grief: mourning has its own course. If the returning stays painful and does not ease, that is a reason to talk to a professional, as discussed in the last section.

## VII. Learning and thinking: the Confucian and biblical lines

The traditions do not know the word rumination, but many of them distinguish thoughtfulness from barren thinking. Similarities here must be checked together with differences: each saying belongs to its own context.

The Analects, a collection of Confucius's conversations recorded by his disciples, contains a short saying (Book II, chapter 15). In James Legge's translation the saying joins learning with thought; its exact wording appears in the epigraph. Confucius does not set thought against knowledge; he demands that they be joined. Thinking in circles resembles the second half of the saying: thought with no inflow of new material. But learning in the Analects is directed above all to the legacy of the ancients: at the start of Book VII Confucius calls himself “A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients”. What we carry over is not the content but the structure: thought needs nourishment. Confucius, The Analects, tr. Legge.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, part of the biblical wisdom literature, speaks to another side of the same problem: “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.” (Ecclesiastes 11:4). It goes on to say that a person does not know the way of the wind or the works of God, and therefore advises sowing in the morning and not withholding one's hand in the evening, since no one knows which will prosper. Waiting for complete clarity appears here as a refusal to work. The text does not promise success; it says that waiting for guarantees is no substitute for sowing. The King James Bible.

In the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks: “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” and concludes: “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” (Matthew 6:27, 6:34). This is a religious word about trust in the heavenly Father, not a psychological technique; its ground is faith. Yet it contains an observation that a non-believing reader can also understand: anxiety about what is not in our power adds nothing to life, and each day has its own measure of work.

These three voices do not say the same thing. Confucius speaks of joining thought and learning, Ecclesiastes of the limit of human knowledge and of working in spite of it, the Gospel of trust in God. They share only one point: endless deliberation does not replace what it was begun for.

## VIII. Unwise consideration, the fasting of the heart and the fruits of action

In the Pāli canon, the discourse known as the Sabbāsava Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 2) opens with a distinction between wise and unwise consideration. In T. W. Rhys Davids's translation (1881), the person who considers unwisely is one who “neither understands what things ought to be considered, nor what things ought not to be considered”. He asks questions about himself in the past and the future: “Have I existed during the ages that are past”, what was I, shall I exist, what shall I become. From such reflection opposing beliefs about the self arise, and the text calls them “the jungle of delusion”, “the wilderness of delusion”, “the puppet show of delusion” and “the fetter of delusion”. Wise consideration, by contrast, is directed to four statements: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation. MN 2, tr. Rhys Davids, SBE XI.

This is Buddhist teaching about the path to liberation, not a psychological theory of rumination. For our subject, a limited analogy can be drawn: what matters is where consideration is directed and what it leads to. The discourse connects unwise consideration with the arising of āsava and entanglement in views about the self; it does not claim that an empirical answer is unavailable. Habermas and colleagues propose questions that do not lead to answers as a possible sign of rumination in a narrative. The similarity is the authors' comparison; the grounds and aims of the two texts differ.

In the fourth chapter of the Zhuangzi, a classic Daoist text, Yan Hui, a disciple of Confucius, is about to set off for the state of Wei to bring to reason a wilful ruler under whom the people perish. Confucius, who in this episode speaks as a Daoist teacher, replies that the disciple's plans are too many and advises him to practise the fasting of the heart. In Herbert Giles's translation (1889), the core of this fasting is put as follows: “let hearing stop with the ears. Let the working of the mind stop with itself.” This is a spiritual practice of emptiness and

responsiveness in which the Tao can abide; it is not advice to stop thinking about a problem. Still, the story contains a recognisable situation: an abundance of plans as an obstacle to action. Chuang Tzŭ, tr. Giles.

The Bhagavad Gita opens with the distress of the warrior Arjuna, who loses his resolve before battle. Krishna teaches him to act in accordance with duty without attachment to the result. In Edwin Arnold's translation (1885), this thought of the second chapter, corresponding to verse 2.47, reads: “Let right deeds be Thy motive, not the fruit which comes from them.” The teaching belongs to a specific religious and epic frame: a warrior's duty, war, and the relation to God. It cannot be transferred literally to everyday decisions. But it points to one more source of circles: the demand to know the result in advance. The Song Celestial, tr. Arnold.

The three lines differ. The Buddhist text speaks of directing attention on the path to liberation, the Daoist one of emptying the mind for the sake of responsiveness, the Indian one of acting without attachment to fruits. None of them teaches thinking less as a universal rule.

## IX. Giving worry an appointment, and not turning every trifle into a decision

If the circle rests on the belief that "I cannot stop thinking about it", it is worth testing the belief itself. Clara Krzikalla and colleagues (Clinical Psychology in Europe, 2024) studied a simple procedure called worry postponement. Participants with generalised anxiety disorder (47 people) or hypochondriasis (35 people) were randomly assigned either to two sessions with instructions or to a waiting list. Over six days they were asked to “postpone their worry process to a predetermined later time”. The rationale was metacognitive: the procedure was meant to weaken the belief that worrying is uncontrollable. Krzikalla et al., 2024.

In the anxiety disorder group, worry decreased more than among those on the waiting list, and the effect persisted at four weeks; for the hypochondriasis group the result was limited. This is a small clinical study and cannot be taken as proof that the technique suits everyone. But it shows something important: the moment at which we think about what worries us is partly a matter of choice.

For ordinary thinking in circles, a cautious conclusion follows. The question need not be forbidden; it can be given a time and a place, for instance twenty minutes tomorrow afternoon, with a sheet of paper and a specific task. If the circle repeats itself at the appointed time, that is one more signal that what is missing is information or action, not thought.

In The Principles of Psychology (1890), in the chapter on habit, William James described another side of the same phenomenon: “There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision”. For such a person, James continues, every daily

action becomes a matter of express deliberation, and “Full half the time of such a man goes to the deciding, or regretting” of such matters. James advises handing over as many details of daily life as possible to “the effortless custody of automatism”, so that the higher powers of the mind are set free for their own work. James, The Principles of Psychology, vol. 1.

This is the observation of a nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist, not the result of an experiment. But it helps to separate the questions that deserve deliberation from those better settled by a rule: when to get up, what to do first, when to answer letters. The fewer trifles that require a daily decision, the more strength is left for what truly calls for thought.

## X. When the circle is a reason to seek help

Almost everyone knows what it is to think in circles, and in itself it is not an illness. But sometimes a state lies behind it that calls for professional help. This article cannot and should not distinguish what is ordinary from a clinical condition; that is a task for a professional. It can name the signs that make a conversation with a professional worth not postponing.

The US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) advises seeking professional help for “severe or distressing symptoms that have lasted 2 weeks or more”, such as difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, difficulty getting out of bed in the morning because of mood, difficulty concentrating, loss of interest in things you usually enjoy, inability to complete usual tasks, and irritability, frustration or restlessness. NIMH, Caring for Your Mental Health. Of anxiety disorders, NIMH writes that they involve more than occasional worry: for people with these disorders, “anxiety does not go away, is felt in many situations, and can get worse over time”, and the symptoms can interfere with daily life, including work, study and relationships. NIMH, Anxiety Disorders.

Some practical guidance follows for our subject. If the circle has lasted for weeks, if because of it you sleep badly, cannot concentrate at work, or have stopped doing what used to come easily, this is a reason not for one more attempt to think it through but for a conversation with a doctor or a mental health professional. NIMH suggests starting with a primary care provider, who can refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist. If thoughts of harming yourself appear, contact the emergency services in your country immediately.

One more caveat is needed. In the study by Habermas and colleagues, participants prone to rumination were in a worse mood than the others, but such data are correlational: they do not show that one causes the other. We do not claim that thinking in circles causes depression or that stopping the circles treats it. The criterion of new information is a tool of self-observation for ordinary difficult decisions, not a treatment.

Seeking help is itself an action that changes the situation. Sometimes it is exactly the next step the circle was missing.

## What this means in practice

Let us return to the person who has spent three weeks deciding whether to leave their job. We suggest not that they stop thinking but that they change the way they think.

First, it helps to phrase the question so that it can be answered. Not "what should I do with my life", but, for example: is it worth moving to a post with such-and-such pay if the current project closes in the spring? This is Dewey's second step, defining the difficulty.

Next, write down what has changed since the last round: new facts, new options, new considerations. If the list is empty after a week, this is not a reproach but information about the process: the thinking is running idle.

The third step is to divide the questions into those settled by reflection and those settled by observation or conversation. What similar work pays, whether the project will survive, what the new team is like: these are found out, not thought out. Next to each such question it helps to write an action: whom to write to, what to read, what to ask.

The fourth is to set a deadline. Not "when it ripens" but a date by which the decision will be made or the next step taken. Notes made now will not fade within a week, and the delay becomes part of a plan.

The fifth: if what is needed is an idea rather than a fact, give the problem a real break. Do something undemanding, go for a walk, set the question aside until the appointed time. A break should not become a continuation of the circle by other means.

The sixth is to check whether the question demands a guarantee that does not exist. No decision about work comes with certainty that it will prove the best. If the circle rests on that demand, it helps to define what risk is acceptable and to decide within it.

Finally, notice whether the circle has lasted for weeks and whether it interferes with sleep, work and relationships. If it does, the next step is a conversation with a professional.

These steps are the authors' suggestion for reflection, not a therapeutic protocol or a traditional practice. Their usefulness is easy to check: has something new appeared after them, whether a fact, an option, a decision or an action?

At the start of this article, a person thought a great deal and learned almost nothing. Now they have a way of telling one from the other. A thought that changes nothing is not necessarily a bad thought: it may simply have finished its work. The next piece of work is done not by that thought but by a question, a test or a step.

## Key quotation

> *“The essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment; and the essence of this suspense is inquiry to determine the nature of the problem before proceeding to attempts at its solution.”*

John Dewey, How We Think (1910), ch. VI, p. 74; English original.

## Connections between traditions

These comparisons concern specific passages already discussed in the article. This is the authors' map of similarities, not a claim of historical influence or a single shared teaching: every connection is accompanied by its limit.

| Texts and lines | Similarity relevant to our subject | Limit of the comparison |
|---|---|---|
| Dewey, How We Think, ch. I, VI ↔ Confucius, Analects II.15, VII.1 | Thought needs material: inquiry into grounds in Dewey and the joining of thought and learning in Confucius | Dewey describes testing a difficulty; Confucian learning turns towards the legacy of the ancients. These are not one method of knowing |
| Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III, 1112a–1113a ↔ Ecclesiastes 11:4–6 | Deliberation and waiting should not indefinitely take the place of possible action | Aristotle concerns means to an already clear end; Ecclesiastes concerns work without knowing God's works and without a guarantee of success |
| Ecclesiastes 11:4–6 ↔ Bhagavad Gita 2.47 in Arnold's translation | Action is possible without knowing its fruits in advance | Biblical wisdom literature is not identical to teaching about a warrior's duty and non-attachment; the religious frames differ |
| MN 2, Sabbāsava Sutta, §§ 5–17 ↔ Habermas et al., 2021, discussion and future directions | One can ask where repeated questions lead; a lack of progress can prompt a change in the direction of attention | MN 2 concerns the cessation of suffering on the path to liberation; Habermas's formal narrative signs are a hypothesis from a correlational study, not confirmation of the discourse |
| Zhuangzi, ch. IV, the Yan Hui episode ↔ Dewey, How We Think, ch. VI | An excess of ready-made plans can be compared with the need to suspend a hasty conclusion and attend more closely to the situation | Daoist fasting of the heart concerns emptiness and the Tao; Dewey's suspended judgment concerns inquiry into a problem. This is the authors' analogy, not one practice |

Links and editions appear in sections III, IV, VII–VIII and the bibliography. The map does not turn statements of faith or philosophical arguments into empirical findings about rumination.

## Comparisons and limits

| Distinction | What it helps us see | What does not follow from it |
|---|---|---|
| Reflection and rumination | What matters is not the length of thinking but the appearance of change | That a person can be typed on the basis of one episode |
| Suspended judgment and endless delay | In Dewey, the delay is filled with inquiry | That every wait is avoidance |
| Deliberation and observation | Some questions are closed by testing, not by thought | That reflection is unnecessary |
| Incubation and chewing over | A break after working on a problem can bring a new idea | That any decision will ripen by itself |
| What is and is not in our power | Deliberation ends with the first possible step | That external circumstances do not matter |
| Anxiety about tomorrow and today's work | Religious texts distinguish worry from the work of the day | That the traditions teach the same thing |
| Self-observation and professional help | There are signs that make solitary rethinking the wrong step | That the article diagnoses or treats |

This is a map of the distinctions within the article. The similarities between traditions and psychological findings are limited to the passages cited; religious statements are attributed to their own texts, and the everyday scenes are the authors' examples.

## Sources and passages used

The sources are public-domain editions and translations, articles under Creative Commons Attribution licences, and NIMH materials (US public domain). Biblical quotations follow the King James Version. The modern scenes and practical steps are the authors' own.

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## Tags

Thinking in circles, rumination, reflection, worry, deliberation, decision, indecision, uncertainty, suspended judgment, incubation, habit, new information, John Dewey, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Confucius, Analects, Ecclesiastes, Sermon on the Mount, Sabbāsava Sutta, wise consideration, Zhuangzi, fasting of the heart, Bhagavad Gita, William James, worry postponement, mental health, self-observation.

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