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Scherer, B. (2018) Neo-orthodox tradition and transition: Lama Ole Nydahl and the diamond way. Info-buddhism.

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# Neo-orthodox Tradition and Transition: Lama Ole Nydahl and the Diamond Way

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## Author's Introduction 2018

Between 2009-2017, I published a series of chapters and articles on the Diamond Way (Scherer 2009; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2017) as outputs of a research project (2007–2015) on this contemporary and controversial Tibetan Buddhist movement; later publications, including the chapter reproduced here in considerably extended form, reflect the status quo as per 2015. Since then, rapid and substantial developments have occurred in the Diamond Way, including the exchange of key players in the organisation. Still, from what I have glimpsed, my observations of the movement's late-charismatic phase presented below still hold.

Previously ([Scherer 2014b: 107–108](#)), I have transparently reflected on my own positionality as a scholar-cum-practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and my own previous connection with Ole Nydahl and his organisation. This connection ceased in 2012.

I maintain that as scholars of contemporary religious movements we need to continue to strive for a balanced representation and evaluation of topics, taking seriously both emic and etic hermeneutical strategies (see Scherer 2009) and drawing from the widest possible methodological pluralism (including historical, philological, anthropological, sociological and critical-conceptual approaches).

Academic criticism can only be justified based on evidenced, sufficient understanding of the diachronic and synchronic contexts (in this case sufficient expertise in Tibetan Studies, Buddhist Studies, and Sociology & Anthropology of Religion); and, if scholars reflect openly upon their own positionality in order to mitigate any possible bias. In the past, the Diamond Way has received some harsh criticism from some writers, including academics, who lack, in full or part, these two vital preconditions.

The same principles of rigour and transparency need to apply for decisively uncritical academic or semi-academic outputs which have appeared over the recent years in the fields of sociology, psychology, geography and anthropology of religion, often written by central European Diamond Way devotees, who, without fact-checking, repeat Diamond Way PR.

Finally, after eight years of intense research, with an added couple of years of further critical distance, I do not want to make it too easy for myself by avoiding completely the question of my current scholarly assessment of the Diamond Way. However, I want to foreground the urgent need for, and insistence on, keeping any discussion nuanced.

Those who have read my previous critical analyses of the Diamond Way around topics such as right-wing politics and machismo might be tempted to reduce the movement simply to a (personality-)cult with questionable tendencies. Yet, avoiding obvious reductionisms, I would be interested to see future research on the movement, exploring pertinent angles such as the construction of authority, 'authenticity', and tradition; the internal negotiations of transnational politics of Tibetan Buddhism in exile; or the subjective well-being benefits

and/or the spiritual bypassing utilised, and possibly the trauma & harm experienced, by Diamond Way devotees. E.g., in light of the traumatic *#metooguru* scandals engulfing organisations such as Shambhala and Rigpa, would it be really justified to place the Diamond Way on the same level with those controversial movements (as done in 2017 by the journalist [Mechthild Klein](#))? The reality might be less sensationalist: The Diamond Way is a complex phenomenon; neither black nor white. As scholars we need to resist simplistic answers. Queue the infamous Facebook relationship status: *it's complicated*.

There is a wide range of Tibetan Buddhist groups and advanced teachers—including Karma Kagyu ones supporting either Karmapa—, which might offer those interested in Tibetan Buddhism a varied, open, inclusive, experienced, learned, and/or non-cultish environment for safe passage through the minefield of contemporary Vajrayāna practices.

As for the Diamond Way, Ole Nydahl is a clear example for a highly charismatic introductory Tibetan Buddhist teacher and he appears to fit the introductory needs of some converts who are happy with (or: are happy to ignore) his politics and personal *habitus*.

Moving on to more advanced practices, while remaining grateful for what has been received before, one may want to reflect upon the advice given by a high Tibetan Karma Kagyu master (quoted in the article below): while a skilful professor might be able to teach primary school children, we should not expect to be taught by a primary school teacher throughout secondary school or even at university level.

Of course, judging the realisation or 'level' of any spiritual teacher is difficult or near impossible for those (including myself) who are making no claim whatsoever to any spiritual realisation or even liberation and enlightenment. Still, the various Buddhist traditions transmit criteria for choosing a spiritual guide. For the Tibetan traditions, these criteria include prominently the advice of the 4th century *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras* ascribed to the future Buddha Maitreya:

*One should have recourse to a spiritual friend who is composed, calm, peaceful;  
with excellent virtues, is diligent, richly learned in the canonical texts;  
has realisation of true reality (thatness), is good at speaking (the dharma);  
compassionate to the core and full of inexhaustible energy.\*  
Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra 17, 10; (my translation)*

Canterbury, 2 December 2018

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

With over 600 centres worldwide, the Tibetan Buddhist Diamond Way movement founded and led by Ole Nydahl (\*1941) is a fast-growing global lay Buddhist movement and the arguably largest convert Buddhist movement in Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike other western Buddhist converts such as Sangharakshita, the founder of the FWBO (now: Triratna), Nydahl and his late wife Hannah (1946–2007) never saw themselves as instigators of a new, specifically western (hybrid or even eclectic) form of Buddhism; instead they have always emphasised the importance of the close, traditional embedment of their teachings within the global Karma Kagyu (bKa' brgyud) tradition. Their Diamond Way might be described as missionary<sup>2</sup> but does not (or only in a very limited way) fit the label “Neo-Buddhism” or “New Buddhism” (Coleman 2001); instead, it can be meaningfully described as a “neo-orthodox” (in Peter Berger’s terminology) or, better, a “neo-orthoprax” Tibetan Buddhist lay movement (see Scherer 2012). Since its practice is traditional and “technical,” the Diamond Way does not qualify to be categorised as predominantly “charismatic” in the sense of the “technical-charismatic dimension” of the Anthony typology (Anthony and Ecker 1987: 39–40); however, the movement displays “charismatic” features in the sense that Nydahl’s personal charisma is a major factor in its cohesion. Galanter’s four psychological elements of a charismatic group (i.e. shared belief system; social cohesiveness; behavioural norms; and charismatic leadership, see Galanter 1989: 5) are broadly applicable to the Diamond Way. Nydahl has drawn criticism from Buddhist and non-Buddhists, academics and non-academics alike for his seemingly unconventional teaching style, his personal life, his political views and his involvement in the ongoing dispute about the identity of the 17th Karmapa, the Karma Kagyu

hierarchy (Scherer 2009; 2011). In this regard, Nydahl occupies a curious place among the different western Buddhist Teachers of the 20th and 21st century. His missionary activities are clearly linked to his uncompromising devotion to the late Sixteenth Karmapa hierarchy (1924–1981), after whose death the Diamond Way transitioned from a limited, grass root convert movement to a player in the politics of global Tibetan Buddhism; during this period Nydahl finally gained recognition as a Lama (bla ma, traditionally acknowledged teacher) and positioned his movement in the schism of the Karma Kagyu school around the recognition of the 17th Karmapa hierarchy: Nydahl supports the candidate put forward by the late 14th ‘Red Hat’ Karmapa or Shamarpa (zhwa dmar pa), Mipham Chökyi Lodrö (mi pham chos kyi glo gros, 1952–2014), Thinley Thaye Dorje (’phrin las mtha’ yas rdo rje \*1983) against Orgyen Thinley Dorje (o rgyan ’phrin las rdo rje \*1985). The latter was recognised by the other three regents including the 12th Tai Situpa (ta’i si tu pa \*1954) and gained support outside the Kagyu lineage both by the Chinese government and by the 14th Dalai Lama (\*1935). The Diamond Way grew steadily and globally until, in 2007, with Hannah Nydahl’s death, the movement entered its current late-charismatic stage.

The Diamond Way teaches neo-orthoprax Karma Kagyu meditation techniques (Scherer 2009), in particular a basic guru-yoga (tantric meditation on the teacher), composed in 1959 by the Sixteenth Karmapa.<sup>3</sup> The traditional cycle of four preliminary practices (’ngöndro’, sngon ’gro) arranged by the Ninth Karmapa (1556–1603)<sup>4</sup> are practiced on the intermediate level and are advised to be kept up even after completion; from 1986 onwards, the advanced level meditation taught exclusively is a guru-yoga on the Eighth Karmapa (1507–1554), which Nydahl received himself in the early 1970s from the Sixteenth Karmapa.<sup>5</sup> This trajectory is a deliberate yet restrictive selection from the vast richness of Kagyu practices. In personal communication, one particular high Karma Kagyu master called the Diamond Way a Buddhist ‘primary school, from which you can graduate to more substantial teachings’.

As a neo-orthoprax movement, “transmission” figures prominently in the Diamond Way as a hermeneutical category for claiming spiritual validation, identification and authenticity. Nydahl utilises “transmission” as motifeme (i.e. as minimum structural feature of

narrative function); through some hermeneutics of suspicion this might appear as a vehicle of self-stylisation; through hermeneutics of trust, genuine transmission narratives can be viewed as necessary for spiritual claims: charisma itself is insufficient (cp. Caplan 2001: 421–427). Two widely circulated and stylised autobiographical books form the core of Nydahl’s legitimisation and transmission accounts (see below: sources). They fulfil the function of hagiographies, which constitute the narrative dimension of the Diamond Way’s identitarian cohesion, emphasised in almost every public lecture given by Nydahl himself. The first of these accounts, *Entering the Diamond Way*,<sup>6</sup> contains the foundational narratives of the Nydahls’ conversion, spiritual training and mission (German: *Sendung*) narrative 1969–1972. The second book *Riding the Tiger*<sup>7</sup> covers the initial charismatic phases of the movement, from Ole and Hannah Nydahl’s return to Copenhagen on 7 October 1972 until the early 1990s.

## Sources and Methodologies

The available sources for Nydahl’s life and teachings present the researcher with multiple difficulties. On the one hand, there are widely published and often modified, adapted and translated official narratives: most notably the aforementioned two auto-biographical (or auto-hagiographical, Tibetan: *rang gi rnam thar*) books *Entering the Diamond Way* (1985, German original 1979)<sup>8</sup> and *Riding the Tiger* (1992, German original 1990)<sup>9</sup>. These accounts have been repeatedly revised and represent the “official” hagiographical view. Variant, not “sanitized” narratives can be found in Nydahl’s oral teachings during his lectures and courses worldwide (many of which are streamed via the internet). A series of question-and-answer books in Eastern European languages (Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and Russian) provide excellent additional sources of little edited or unedited oral transcripts, which, while mediated through simultaneous translation from English into the local language, still provide first hand access to Nydahl’s direct teaching style.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, many important documents for post-1990 development, especially in Eastern Europe, are accessible in semi-internal publications and other archive material. For instance, by 1999, Diamond Way magazines such as *Buddhism Today* in the U.S. first published in 1996 were available in five languages (English, German, Danish, Hungarian and Russian); by

2003, Diamond Way magazines were available in thirteen languages and their number has been rising since then. Hence, the academic biographer needs to adopt methodological pluralism when tracing and evaluating the emic (auto-)hagiographical narratives. These approaches can include literary criticism and discourse analysis in order to analyse fact and fiction; where published material is sparse, qualitative ethnography and anthropological participant-observation can complement and sometimes challenge the emic normative accounts. The sociological paradigms and typologies of the study of New Religious Movements, including conversion theory, can to be applied (and sometimes challenged); while maintaining a sufficient etic distance necessary for academic critical inquiry; still, emic hermeneutical paradigms from the history of Tibetan Buddhism and particularly of the Kagyu tradition (such as “Crazy Wisdom”) should also be adduced. Also, the positionality of the researchers—their biases and involvements (the well-known insider-outsider problematic in the study of religions, see, e.g., McCutcheon 1999, Knott 2005)—needs to be transparent and, if necessary, contestable. In my own case, as a scholar-cum-practitioner, I conducted my field research prior to 2012 as an observer-participant, oscillating from insider to outsider while co-shaping the same discourses I analyse as a scholar. Throughout this article I aim to maintain a Buddhist “both ... and” perspective: as I have proposed elsewhere, hermeneutics of suspicion needs to be balanced by hermeneutics of recovery (Ricoeur, see Scherer 2009).

## **Research on the Diamond Way until 2010**

The academic reception of Ole Nydahl and his Diamond Way begins in the 1990s (cp. Scherer 2009: 30). Anderson (1994), applying Wallis’ typology of New Religious Movements (NRMs) to Tibetan Buddhism in Denmark, characterized the Diamond Way as a “world-affirming” NRM (p. 152). Stephen Batchelor briefly described him as a “sun-tanned Viking” who projects an “ecstatic, sensuous version of Tantric Buddhism” with “fundamentalist and sectarian overtones” (1994: 114). Nydahl received a more balanced, two-page appraisal by Andrew Rawlinson (1997: 462–463). In Germany, Eva Saalfrank’s qualitative ethnographic study on convert identity—originally a 1995 doctoral dissertation—contains an initial, more extensive academic

evaluation of Nydahl and the Diamond Way (cp., in particular, Saalfrank 1997: 124–140), which is, with all necessary caveats, still valuable. Brief and critical comments by continental European religionists follow; they include Oliver Freiberger (2001: 65. 70n30), Martin Baumann (2002: 99, 2005; 377) and Lionel Obadia (2002a; 2002b: 182–183; 2007: 105); finally, Jørn Borup (2005: 156–163; 2007: 46–49; 2008) provides a balanced overview and evaluation of Nydahl and the Diamond Way in Denmark. In 2009, I attempted to establish a new hermeneutical framework for a broader appraisal and analysis of the movement (Scherer 2009).

## Diamond Way Beginnings

A WWII middle class Danish war child, Ole Nydahl (\*1941) grew up in the relatively sheltered conditions in Lynbgy, north of Copenhagen. Nydahl's self-described childhood 'wildness' (Klein 1998: 55, cp. Nydahl 1985: 50, <sup>2</sup>1999: 38)<sup>11</sup> continued prominently into early adulthood, when he regularly got into fights and proved to be difficult to handle during his service in the Danish army (1960–1961, Nydahl 1985: 8=<sup>2</sup>1999: 2). Nydahl ultimately neglected an academic education in favour of motorcycles, boxing and drugs: Experimenting with, among others, cannabis and LSD, Nydahl and his childhood sweetheart and later wife Hannah (1946–2007) started drug smuggling. As a life-long friend of Nydahl put it, "People always forget: Ole was not really a nice person then" (personal communication, 2007). This evaluation balances the hegemonic (auto-)hagiographical reading, in which Nydahl's fierceness is seen as a natural reflection of his conditioning as a protector from previous lives.<sup>12</sup> This recurring (auto-)hagiographic element intra-textually prepares and corroborates Nydahl's claim from 1980 onwards to be an emanation of the Buddhist protector deity Mahākāla (cp. Scherer 2009: 24–25). Suspicious critics have seen this as an example of Nydahl's tendency to prematurely claim spiritual authority, *hyperbole*, self-mystification and self-aggrandisement. (e.g. Saalfrank 1997: 131–132). Nydahl intertextually legitimises his *metanoia* (reformation) by defining his *Entering the Diamond Way* as "a book in the style of Milarepa's life story."<sup>13</sup> The *Mi la'i rnam thar* by gTsang smyon He ru ka<sup>14</sup> relates the conversion, reformation and liberation of the notorious black

magician and murderer and later famous yogi Milarepa (1040–1123), one of the realised founding figures and a vital link in the transmission lineage of the various Kagyu branches. As a self-proclaimed modern yogi, Nydahl suggests reading his own life story as a modern variation of Milarepa's dramatic transformation.

Nydahl's conversion and mission narrative is often denoted as his "three years in the Himalayas"<sup>15</sup> becoming- according to his own narrative - the "first western students of the great Tibetan master, His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa" (Nydahl 1985: back cover text).<sup>15a</sup> His "three years of training" is narratively often constructed in a such way that it invites the comparison (or even implicit identification) with the traditional three-year retreats, which since Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye's 19th centuries reforms (see Kongtrul 1994) is usually seen as a necessary prerequisite for the "Lama" title (Scherer 2009: 35 and footnote 21). In reality, the time both Nydahls spent in the Himalayas and with the Sixteenth Karmapa was shorter, albeit intense.

In his recent Tibetan rnam thar ('liberation story', biography) of the Sixteenth Karmapa (1924–1981), the 14th Shamarpa briefly summarises Nydahl's conversion and subsequent missionary activities (Shamar Rinpoche 2013, 102–105).

*In 1968 AD H.H. (the Sixteenth Karmapa) went to the capital of Nepal; at this time, he gave refuge and bodhisattva vows to two westerners from Denmark called Ole Nydahl and his wife Hannah Nydahl who were hippies; he made them his students. After they abandoned the usage of drugs H.H. gave them (some of) the upāsaka (lay) vows. (...) In 1972 HH told them go back to Europe and proclaim everywhere the four noble truths (...) He told Ole Nydahl that if there was anyone who asked for refuge vows, he would be allowed to give those. (Shamar Rinpoche 2013: 102, my translation)<sup>16</sup>*

The following passage mentions Nydahl's rhetorical skills and his subsequent success in gradually establishing approximately 600 dharma centres worldwide, while stressing the ultimate agency of the Sixteenth Karmapa. The brief mentioning of Nydahl focusses for the rest on the establishment of the Copenhagen centre and on Nydahl's support for the Dalai Lama's visit there in 1973 and 1988. It is noteworthy, however, that the text confirms Nydahl's own account of

being authorised to give refuge, which was a milestone for Nydahl to becoming acknowledged as Lama. The function of including Nydahl in the Sixteenth Karmapa's rnam thar is explicated by a concluding reflection in the authorial voice:

*If I write (about Nydahl's activity) in the (Karmapa's) liberation story at this time while Lama Ole himself is (still) alive, so that there will be no fault later, it shows that (Nydahl's activity) is also the result of Gyalwa Karmapa's activity. Therefore, I have explicitly included this here. (Shamar Rinpoche 2013: 104–105, my translation)<sup>17</sup>*

During its early stages, the Diamond Way grew indeed from the singular mission of a devoted convert to a notable vehicle of Kagyu globalisation. Lecturing in the autumn 1972, Nydahl on the Danish island of Møn and in Copenhagen Nydahl's missionary activities took him beyond the Danish borders as early as November 1972; in teaching and, for the first time, giving Buddhist refuge in Graz (Austria). Shortly thereafter, the Nydahls presented the Kagyu teachings at a spiritual event in Odense. A characteristic westernisation of practice emerged: guided meditations in the local language instead of *pūjas* chanted in Tibetan. During this period, Nydahl also developed a pre-preliminary practice particular to the Diamond Way<sup>18</sup>, i.e. the 'short refuge' meditation of 11,111 simplified mantra repetitions preceding the refuge/prostrations (111,111 repetitions) of the sngon gro'. The Nydahls had started a centre in Copenhagen in 1972; slowly, groups in Sweden and in Germany were established, while good contacts to the Theosophic Society in Utrecht brought the missionary activity to the Netherlands. The Nydahls played an instrumental role in the European visits of Kalu Rinpoche (May 1974 until the end of 1976) and Karmapa (winter 1974/1975 and summer 1977). In June 1975, the Copenhagen centre was moved to its current location. Some set-backs in Sweden and the initial activities in Greece ensued. In 1976, his missionary efforts even brought him behind the Iron Curtain into Czechoslovakia and Poland, where a group was formed in Krakow.

Concentrating on establishing centres, Nydahl's style indicated clear neo-orthoprax signs, when in the fall of 1977, concerned with the purity of the transmission, he opposes the establishment of a non-

sectarian (tib. *ris med*) centre in Hamburg<sup>19</sup> the German *Karma-Kagyü Verein* ('Karma Kagyu association') was founded in Munich with Nydahl as the chairman. Later, Tenga Rinpoche (bsTan dga' Rin po che), who spent more than a year from 1978 to 1979 in Copenhagen, became the second chairman.

After the death of the Sixteenth Karmapa in 1981 in Chicago, Nydahl established himself as a serious voice among the global, traditional and monastically dominated Karma Kagyu. With the six-month transmission of the Rin chen gter mdzod from Kalu Rinpoche in 1983—adding to, among others, the kLong chen snying thig 'pho ba from Ayang Tulku (1972), the "Six Yogas of Nāropa" (nā ro chos drug, 1975) and the bKa' brgyud sngags mdzod (1976) from Karmapa—, his training and spiritual transmission could be viewed as complete. During the initial stages, a western meditation style emerged while Tibetan ritual was maintained, and intra-Karma-Kagyü political struggles occurred between Kalu Rinpoche, Chime Rinpoche ('Chi med Rin po che), Ayang Tulku and the Nydahls. An idea of territorial responsibilities arose, in which Nydahl saw himself authorized especially for the Germanic and Slav countries and left France for the monastic Karma Kagyu (Scherer 2009: 32–33). At the same time, neo-orthodox features appeared, and a first phase of institutionalization began.

His missionary drive led to Nydahl's characteristically extensive travel schedules beyond his original focus on Denmark, Germany and Austria; e.g. in 1988, he travelled around the globe three times (Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1989: 244); in the 1980s Nydahl started to venture deep behind the Iron Curtain and the Diamond Way grew in the U.S. and Central/South America.<sup>20</sup>

By the beginning of the 1990s had emerged as a recognised Buddhist teacher, a Lama. Nydahl's authorisation and spiritual legitimisation as an authentic Karma Kagyu teacher is one of the recurrent themes in the Diamond Way hagiographic narratives. Given the background of the Tibetan hagiographic rnam thar ("liberation narratives") genre, this is rather unsurprising: the construction of authenticity, transmission and spiritual lineage is one major component of a rnam thar. It seems evident that Nydahl's spiritual development was not finished when he was thrown into the depths of Buddhist missionary

work in the west. The first charismatic phase (1972–1981) was certainly not only a period of teaching but also and predominantly one of learning. Nydahl was finally formally acknowledged as a “Buddhist Master” by the lineage holder Shamar Rinpoche in August 1983.<sup>21</sup> Still, it is plausibly possible that Karmapa had already called Nydahl a “Lama”—as Nydahl himself insists, but that Karmapa, out of consideration for the traditional branches of his school, did not do so officially or outside the Diamond Way circles. The usage of the title “Lama” in the authorship of Nydahl’s books begins in 1992; since 1995, the usage of “Lama” by higher Lamas in reference to Nydahl has been documented.

## **The Global Schism and Diamond Way Expansion (1992–2007)**

Nydahl’s successful recognition by the tradition as a legitimate teacher was finalised during a period of great tribulations and schism for the global Karma Kagyu community shortly mentioned above around the recognition of the 17th Karmapa. The external validations by the two poles of power in the politics of transnational Tibetan Buddhism—the Chinese government and the Tibetan Government in exile—resulted in the majority of the Tibetan population accepting Orgyen Thinley as the Sixteenth Karmapa’s reincarnation; yet, the global Karma Kagyu followership was less clearly convinced and found itself in the middle of a religious and political power struggle and schism. Throughout the conflict Nydahl loyally supported the senior lineage holder Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche, who enthroned Thaye Dorje as the 17th Karmapa in Delhi in 1994. This allegiance proved crucial and has continued alongside the growing global support for Thaye Dorje, despite strong partisan polemics and scholarly contention, especially in the U.S. (cf. Scherer 2009: 28–29). The global schism certainly stabilised Nydahl’s position as a charismatic and authenticated lay teacher; politically, he had rendered himself indispensable. The schism also sped up the formal modernisation within the Diamond Way. Increasingly, the practice of the preparatory meditations (sngon ’gro) was emphasised in Diamond Way centres; only the mantra phases of the traditional sngon ’gro texts were recited in Tibetan and *pūjā*’s chanted in Tibetan

were generally phased out; the traditional prostrations in front of the altar upon entering the meditation hall were scrapped; Buddhas and Bodhisattvas received western names: e.g., ‘Chenrezig’ (sPyan ras gzigs i.e, Avalokiteśvara) became ‘Loving Eyes’; finally, also the Tibetan refuge formula was exchanged with translations. During this third charismatic phase (1992–2007), the Diamond Way continued to expand globally. As of 2003, increasing travel activities in Central and Southern America and the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe had allowed the movement to grow to more than 400 centres worldwide. Courses in Central and Eastern Europe regularly drew thousands and, since 1987, the teaching of the kLong chen snying thig Phowa (’pho wa) or “Conscious Dying” had become increasingly important and almost a trademark of Nydahl (see Scherer 2009: 37). Tibetan rituals called “blessing empowerments” (*rjes gnang*), which lack the serious commitments of tantric practice initiations (Skt. *abhiṣeka*, dbang), were frequently given by Lamas loyal to Shamarpa and especially by the influential Bhutanese Drukpa Kagyu Lama Lopon Tsechu Rinpoche (sLob dpon Tshe chu Rin po che, 1918-2003; he also supported the Diamond Way by building a considerable amount of stūpas at Diamond Way centres throughout Europe (see Preschern 2011). Karmapa Thaye Dorje visited Europe for the first time in January 2000 and was received by a large Diamond Way following in Düsseldorf (Germany).

At the same time early signs of late-charismatic consolidations emerged; gradually, the wealth of possible Tibetan Deity Yoga practices for the relatively few serious practitioners who went beyond the extensive preliminary cycles of meditation was reduced to the single, aforementioned 8th Karmapa guru-yoga practice. So-called “traveling teachers” were appointed to teach in the Diamond Way centres. Initially only a dozen, their number grew steadily to over 30 in 2003; by 2010, there were 232 (see Scherer 2012); a homogeneous, streamlined and conformist movement emerged, in which Nydahl grew less and less patient with both spiritual and personal diversity.

Several events hailed the end of expansion and the beginning of the newly emphasised consolidation: with the death of Lopon Tsechu Rinpoche (10 June 2003), Diamond Way lost one of its most charismatic traditional supporters. Two months later (31 July 2003),

Nydahl had a serious parachute accident and left health care professionals fighting for his life for several weeks, with months of rehabilitation following. One year after the accident, a potential organisational crisis was narrowly avoided, when Nydahl's (additional) intimate relationship of 14 years with Caty H. (\*1965) ended: H. who had grown into the organisational manager of the Diamond Way, remained until 2015 as its "institutional face".

The final and most decisive incision occurred with the death of Hannah Nydahl on April 1, 2007 after long illness; a very private person, she had left the extrovert activities to Ole Nydahl while working in the background: the Diamond Way had clearly entered the ongoing, consolidating late-charismatic period.

## **A Late-charismatic Movement in Transition**

Nydahl's recipe for the westernisation and globalisation of Tibetan Buddhism can be characterised by "neo-orthopax re-packaging" of traditional content (Scherer 2011) with a mixture of modernist features, old boys' charm and apparent hedonist wrappings.

Viewed in the light of the Tibetan rnam thar genre, Nydahl's life story can be regarded as a modern example of established metanoia- and "Crazy-Yogi"-narratives found within the Karma Kagyu tradition (see Scherer 2009; 2012). Some aspects of Nydahl's teachings are directly linked to biographical "scars": his unconventional path towards authenticated spiritual validation as a Lama is directly connected to his propagation of a lay Buddhism based on idealism and friendship. Furthermore, establishing and building up centres is hagiographically argued to be more important than undergoing formal training (which Nydahl himself lacks) and is also presented as a means to achieve equivalent levels of spiritual realisation while compassionately working for the benefit of humanity. Interestingly, rhetorically placing charismatic leadership and Buddhist activity above meditation retreats has a prominent Tibetan precursor in, i.e., Lama Zhang (g.Yu grags pa brTson grus grags, 1122-1193), the founder of the Tshal pa bKa' brgyud (Yamamoto 2009).

Nydahl's mixing of personal *habitus* and teachings has led to the Diamond Way being termed "life-style Buddhism." Further, Diamond Way criticism has focused on the extent hedonism evidenced by the enjoyment and propagation of high-adrenalin sports such as motorcycling, bungee-jumping and sky diving; and on the prevalent militaristic appearances, right-wing political views and fierce Anti-Islam rhetoric (Scherer 2009). In particular, the ever present hetero-machismo and (hetero-)sexual promiscuity within the Diamond Way has drawn strong criticism (Scherer 2011). Nydahl's mixing of his sexual life with his teaching activities even sparked a short internal, semi-public disagreement with the late 14th Shamar Rinpoche in the summer of 2010 (primarily via shared e-mail correspondence); Nydahl felt slandered by a statement on the website of the lineage Lama, which contained some misunderstandings.

Nydahl has routinised his charisma by leaving organisational power to a limited group of administrators (called 'the pool') headed by his former intimate partner Caty H. and by appointing more than 200 auxiliary ('travelling') teachers (Scherer 2012; since 2014 called "Diamond way teachers" apparently reversed to being called 'travelling teachers' in 2018). While this group includes a few experienced meditators and perhaps even one or two traditionally trained Buddhist teachers, most of Nydahl's support teachers have no or no significant Buddhist education; no significant retreat experience; and have been appointed by Nydahl as personal choices based on closeness to himself and the vague criterion of "life experience"; in many cases they appear to simply regurgitate Nydahl's own teachings. Yet, these auxiliary teachers are not performing any core functions of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher (lama), such as giving refuge. Still, Nydahl has been criticised for this non-traditional practice and the apparent cronyism as propagating "Buddhism light." (Scherer 2009 and 2012)—a charge Buddhist modernists are regularly facing from traditionalists or parochialists.<sup>22</sup>

The Diamond Way's late charismatic phase is marked by increasing consolidation, institutionalisation and a strong in-group pressure to conformity. Due to growing external criticism, Nydahl has adopted a more rigid approach concerning his followers in matters of political activism ("no politics in the centres") and conduct codes for social

media. In particular the support teachers are expected to close ranks: In 2010, Nydahl publicly revoked the authority of one particular 'traveling teacher' to teach in Nydahl's name, because this teacher had reportedly emphasised a more Tibetan form and style of practice in the teachings he gave. Other prominent eccentric and/or critical voices were either silenced and marginalised or publicly ostracised. Since 2007, less personality cult-oriented Diamond Way students have been reporting of an uncomfortable atmosphere of 'Ole-normative' suspicion, fear and peer pressure in several of Nydahl's centres and groups: late-charismatic paranoia appears to surface at least in some parts of the movement. Conformism and institutionalisation appear to resist even the rare counteracting attempts by Nydahl himself: For example, in 2009, Nydahl failed to shake up developing the hierarchisation among the exponentially growing number of 'traveling teachers' (see Scherer 2012).

A set of major changes occurred in the summer of 2014. After a string of health problems Nydahl announced on 10 June 2011 that he will discontinue offering his trademark phowa courses (teaching phowa is traditionally seen as a strain on health of the teacher). Further, the death of Shamar Rinpoche on the following day impacts the whole Karma Kagyu community significantly, including the transitioning late-charismatic movement, adding further insecurities for its future. End of July, Nydahl added a further layer of routinisation of charisma by appointing two of his Diamond Way teachers to special *ombudsmen*, a new, powerful position: They are supposed to "know, and master, the conditioned world with lightness and our [sc. Nydahl's] vision of healthy human development. Their general role will be to strengthen the human side, answer questions that our Diamond Way teachers do not cover and bring necessary issues to the lama." (Nydahl, letter to students worldwide, Amden 30 July 2014).

The post-charismatic future of the Diamond Way will largely depend on its positioning towards the Karma Kagyu tradition. Nydahl has fostered (or at least: tolerated) a personality cult around him, which is openly breeding sectarian tendencies and calling for a stronger break from the Tibetan tradition. Questioning the authority of the Karmapa, such 'Ole-ist' (Nydahl-centred) sectarianism has already surfaced

undisguisedly in August 2012, when at the Europe Center, one of Nydahl's closest students, a prominent 'travelling teacher', directly challenged the authority of the then present 17th Karmapa hierarch in what seems to have been a warped expression of misunderstood Nydahl-guru-devotion. In contrast to Nydahl's (and his 'pool's') harsh reactions to non-conforming independently thinking 'travelling teachers', Nydahl in this case only pressed his student to give a half-hearted apology: Nydahl-loyalty clearly appears to trump the loyalty to Karmapa and the broader Karma Kagyu tradition. These occurrences are an indication that at least a small core of 'Ole-ists' might attempt to institutionalise an Ole-Buddhist sect and break away from the Karma Kagyu fold in the post-charismatic future, while others will have to negotiate the return of the Ole-movement under the authority of the Karmapa. If pressed to speculate further on the post-charismatic fate of the Diamond Way, I suspect that not too many (maybe only 10%) of the Diamond Way followers—naturally mainly those who might lose privilege and influence—may want to support 'Ole-ism' after his death; a substantial part, whose membership mainly depends on Nydahl's personal charisma, comradeship and shared (white, middle-class, heterosexual privileged) hedonism will simply fall away; perhaps 40% of followers will 'graduate' to more traditional teachers and more substantial teachings.

Whether the recent developments within the Diamond Way are viewed as cultish or simply prudent completely depends on the observer. Based on hermeneutics of suspicion, one might perceive an authoritarian leadership here and an attempt to consolidate by creating conformism and silencing internal dissidence and the toleration of (present and future) personality-cult-based sectarianism; all these features are commonly connected with "cults." Based on hermeneutics of trust, one could argue that, in late-charismatic periods, the consolidation of a movement necessarily entails creating and solidifying the highest possible cohesion and communal vision in order to carry the movement through the tribulations after the charismatic leader's death. Irrespective of the observer's view, the struggle between orthodox idealists and neo-Buddhist sectarians, coupled with multiple other factors such as relations and cooperation with the Tibetan Karma Kagyu hierarchy, the nature and scope of the

spiritual authority granted to Nydahl’s Diamond Way teachers, ombudsmen and administrators, as well as regional and global cohesion and identity among Nydahl’s centres will be of key interest as the final pages of the Danish Lama’s hagiography and the future of his legacy are written. ■

## Footnotes

\* *mitraṃ śrayed dāntaśamopaśāntaṃ guṇādhikaṃ sodyamam āgamādhyam prabuddhatatvaṃ vacas ābhyupetaṃ kṛpātmakaṃ khedavivarjitaṃ ca* (ed. Lévi 1907, p. 119)

bshes gnyen dul ba zhi zhing nyer zhi pa, yon tan lhag pa brtson bcas lung gis phyug.

de nyid rab tu rtogs pa smra mkhas ldan, brtse ba’i bdag nyid skyo ba spangs la bsten. (D. 212a4-5)

調靜除德增 有勇阿含富, 覺真善說法 悲深離退滅. (Taishō 1604, 635a13-14).

The 7th century Chinese translation by Prabhākaramitra 波羅頗蜜多羅 incorporates Vasubandhu’s commentary on the root verses in a markedly different way from the transmitted Sanskrit text and its Tibetan translation; therefore, the Chinese version refers in the verses 13–14 only to the eight attributes of the *kalyāṇa-mitra* (spiritual friend, 善知識 635a8; 11; 15). In 14a, the Chinese text makes it clear that the rhetorical skills of the spiritual friend are linked to propagating the dharma: ‘good at speaking the dharma (法)’

<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on, revised and updated from my previously published ‘Conversion, Devotion and (Trans-)Mission: Understanding Ole Nydahl’, in Todd Lewis (ed.) 2014. *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners*, Blackwell Wiley, London, pp. 96-106 (with permission).

<sup>2</sup> Scherer 2009: 27; on the application of the term to Buddhist movements see Learman 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Nydahl’s autohagiographic books curiously do not mention the transmission of this basic meditation. According to Nydahl’s later recollection, Karmapa transmitted the practise in 1970 (see Nydahl 2007: 24 [interview from 24 May 2006]; its Tibetan text can be found in KKD 1999; see also Scherer 2009: 36) While this simple ‘Three-Lights-Meditation’ has come to be viewed as the Diamond Way’s signature practice, it is worth noting that this meditation is also occasionally practised outside the Diamond Way—mainly as a short introductory practice invoking the Lama and the blessing of the lineage at the beginning of more complex (chanted) meditations or *pūjās*; for example, in the *Karma Kagyud Buddhist Centre* (Singapore) led by Shangpa Rinpoche and

Dupseng Rinpoche, this short meditation prefaces the weekly longer *37 Practices of the Bodhisattva pūjā*.

<sup>4</sup> The preparatory (or: preliminary) practices entail 100,000 or 111,111 repetitions each of reciting the refuge formula and or while doing full body prostrations (to purify the body); reciting the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva (to purify speech and mind); reciting the *maṇḍala* offering formula (presenting the whole universe to all Buddhas in gratitude and filling the mind with countless positive imprints) and of reciting the formula of devotional praise to the gurus (to prepare the student for blessings of the higher tantric meditations).

<sup>5</sup> See Nydahl 1979: 211; 1983: 194-195; 1985: 216; <sup>2</sup>1989: 224; <sup>3</sup>1994: 185; in extended form: Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1999: 191; <sup>4</sup>2003: 227-228.

<sup>6</sup> German: 1979, <sup>2</sup>1989, <sup>3</sup>1995, <sup>4</sup>2003; Danish: 1983; English 1985, <sup>2</sup>1999.

<sup>7</sup> German: 1990, <sup>2</sup>1994, <sup>3</sup>2005; English: 1992.

<sup>8</sup> *Die Buddhas vom Dach der Welt: Mein Weg zu den Lamas* ('The Buddhas from the Roof of the World: My Journey to the Lamas'); this edition formed the basis of the 1985 English edition. In the second German edition, Nydahl's "Danish-German" was thoroughly revised by two Austrian students who were very close to him at that time (Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1989: 7); it also included an appended interview from 1982 for the magazine *Esotera*. The appendix and some other "dated" material were omitted for the third German edition in 1994. The current 2003 German version was completely revised and reformulated by Nydahl's German team. The meditations included in all versions from the 2nd German edition onwards have been constantly modified and modernized.

<sup>9</sup> *Über alle Grenzen* ('Beyond All Borders'); the second German edition (Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1994) describes the activities until 1994; in its preface, Nydahl states that the two books are "light years apart" ("Die erste und zweite Auflage dieses Buchs trennen Lichtjahre" (p. 6; see also the Dutch translation, Nydahl 2000: 8). Finally, the third German edition includes a two-page summarizing update ("Ausblick 1994-2005" Nydahl <sup>3</sup>2005: 440-441).

<sup>10</sup> Nydahl 1993. 1998ab; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2006; 2008; 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Nydahl calls himself "ungeeignet für jede Dressur" ("untamable," lit.: "unsuitable for any kind of dressage" Nydahl 1990: 90=<sup>2</sup>1994: 80=<sup>3</sup>2005: 88; the phrase is omitted in the English version Nydahl 1992: 92).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Nydahl 1996: 33; 1997: 31; <sup>2</sup>1999: 2 (not in the 1985 first edition!).

<sup>13</sup> 'Ein Buch im Stil der Lebensgeschichte Milarepas' (Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1994: 118 = <sup>3</sup>2005: 127).

<sup>14</sup> Translated famously by Walter Y. Evans-Wentz in 1928; for a recent new translation see Quintman 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Nydahl 1992: 9; the German original adds "of training" to the years - "Lehrjahre" (1990: 9 = <sup>2</sup>1994: 9 = <sup>3</sup>2005: 13) evoking a literary genre of the *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>15a</sup> The mytheme of the Nydahls as the first western students of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa can be traced down to at least 1982; it appears to originate shortly after the

Karmapa's death: while missing in the first German edition of *Entering the Diamond Way* (Nydahl 1979 - and in the main text of all subsequent German editions), Nydahl makes this claim in the Danish version (1983: 61 "Kønne eller ej, var vi hans [sc. 16. Karmapas] første vestlige elever") and the English versions (1985: 66 "Pretty or not, we were his [sc. the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's] first Western disciples" = <sup>2</sup>1999: 54, yet with "students" instead of "disciples"). The earliest evidence for this claim I could find is a German interview in the magazine *Esotera* from 1982 (reproduced as appendix to Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1989). Here Nydahl is asked about the last rites of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa when he makes the claim (Nydahl <sup>2</sup>1989: 255, English translation also in Nydahl 1985: 239): "Hannah and I were his [sc. the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's] first Western students".

As Tenzin Peljor and Carola Roloff (Jampa Tsedroen) pointed out (*personal communication*) there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the Nydahls were, in fact, not the first Western students of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa: for example, already in 1960 the British woman Freda Bedi became the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's student (Mackenzie 1998: 96); Freda was ordained by him in 1966 (Mackenzie 1998: 138-139) as, apparently, the first western woman to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun; a second western woman was ordained by 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa the following year (i.e. also before the Nydahls' met the Karmapa): Diane Perry i.e. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo.

*Excuse: Nydahl on Freda Bedi*

Nydahl himself acknowledges Freda (Khechok Palmo) as helping him and Hannah with traditional offerings for their dge bsnyen (ma)/ upāsaka (upāsikā) vows at Rumtek in late 1970 (Nydahl 1979: 132 = <sup>2</sup>1989: 145-146 = <sup>3</sup>1995: 121-122 = <sup>4</sup>2003: 141; Danish: 1983: 122; English: 1985: 135-136 = <sup>2</sup>1999: 112-113). The English versions and the German from the second edition include a picture of Sister Palmo. The short sentence in the first German edition reads "*Sister Palmo, eine ältere Nonne aus England, die seit Jahren hier lebte und sehr viel für die Tibeter um die Welt getan hatte, ...*" This statement was augmented in the first Danish and English version which reads "Sister Palmo, an elderly English nun, helped us get the traditional offerings we would need. She was an impressive lady of the old school who was able to stay for years at Rumtek due to Indian citizenship. Among other things, she sent four Tibetan incarnations to the west in 1967, after training them at her school at Dalhousie." However, the subsequent German versions omit any further praise – adding in the second version 1989 a praise of Hannah's charm (found first in Danish 1983 and English 1985) in an obvious attempt to counterbalance any praise for a plain nun. This passage remains in English <sup>2</sup>1999 but was dropped in German <sup>3</sup>1995. In the second English edition Freda Bedi's short praise becomes critically qualified by Nydahl with clear, albeit implicit criticism of Chogyal Trungpa and Akong Rinpoche: "Sister Palmo, an elderly English nun, helped us get the traditional gifts we would need. She was an impressive lady of the old school who was able to stay for years at Rumtek due to an Indian citizenship. She had been with Dalai Lama first but then went to Karmapa because she would rather meditate than

debate. At this time she did more for the Tibetan refugees and their culture than probably anyone else. Not everything was a success, however. Among other things, three of the four Tibetan incarnations she sent to Scotland in 1967, after training them at her school in the western Himalayas, became quite an embarrassment to Tibetan Buddhism. Especially in the UK and North America, they | seriously slowed-and slow-the development of a self-reliant Diamond Way Buddhism on transparent Western premises." The fourth German version neutralises any remaining praise: Sister Palmo, in earlier versions at least called 'impressive' or someone 'who did much for the Tibetans worldwide' was reduced to 'an elderly English nun who had remained in India' because 'as close friend to Indira Gandhi she had raised the funds for the monastery and was allowed to stay there' (*Als nahe Freundin Indira Gandhis hatte sie das Geld für das Kloster beschafft und durfte da wohnen*).

Nydahl acknowledges to have received teachings from Sister Palmo on the 8<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Guru Yoga (1979: 211=21989: 224= <sup>3</sup>1989:185 = <sup>4</sup>2003: 227-228; English 1985: 216=<sup>2</sup>1999: 191); but, again, he qualifies his earlier praise for the nun in the second English and fourth German edition: "Between the initiations Gelongma Palmo, the stately English nun, gave some teachings on our next practice. It was the meditation on the eighth Karmapa and his energy-field. As her Tibetan was not good and she did embody a strong Christian, Hindu, and Gelugpa background, some of her instructions we had to discard later." (similar the German version talks about 'having to renegotiate later several of her instructions with Karmapa':... *mussten wir mehrere ihrer Anweisungen später mit Karmapa neu verhandeln*).

Nydahl's treatment of Freda is elucidating in the way his autohagiographical versions shift from appreciation of this western monastic to downplaying with dismissive criticism her role as his teacher and a facilitator of the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. This shift appears to be in line with Nydahl's tendency for self-aggrandizement and his anti-monastic agenda.

<sup>16</sup> spyi lo 1968 lor rgyal dbang mchog nyid bal yul rgyal sar phebs skabs nub yo rob Dan mag (Danmark) nas yong ba'i o li ni Dal dang khong gi bza' zla hA na ni Dal zhes pa'i hi pi brtul zhugs 'chang ba gnyis la skyabs sdom dang byang chub sems sdom bcas bstsal te slob mar bcug. bzi sman za 'thung sogs yongs su spangs pa'i dge bsnyen sna 'ga' spyod pa'i sdom pa bstsal. (...) phyi lo 1972 lor khong gnyis la rgyal dbang mchog gis khyod rang gnyis nub yu rob kyis phyogs kun tu song nas bden pa bzhi ... sgrogs. skyabs sdom zhu mkhan byung na o li ni Dal khyod rang gis skyabs sdom sbyin chog. (I thank drs. Joost Palenstijn, Rangjung Yeshe institute, Kathmandu, for critically checking the translation from the Tibetan).

<sup>17</sup> da lta'i | char bla ma o li ni Dal nyid 'tsho bzhin pa'i skabs 'dir physis skyon du ma song bar rnam thar du 'khod na rgyal dbang karma pa'i mdzad don gyis grub 'bras kyang mtshon par mngon pas zhar du bris so.

<sup>18</sup> Nydahl 1979: 231; 1983: 214; 1985: 235; <sup>2</sup>1989: 244, omitted in subsequent editions.

<sup>19</sup> Nydahl 1990: 117-118 = 1992: 123 = <sup>2</sup>1994: 104-105 = <sup>3</sup>2005: 113-114.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the second charismatic phase (1981-1992) see Scherer 2014: 100-102.

<sup>21</sup> The corresponding document is reproduced in Nydahl 1983: 219 and in all successive English and German versions of *Entering the Diamond Way* until the fourth German edition (Nydahl 2003) where it is omitted: by then this authentication appears to have served its function.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g. Soucy (2010: 51) regarding criticism of Thich Nhat Hanh by traditional Vietnamese Buddhist.

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*Note on the author's relationship to the Diamond Way*

In 2000, Bee (Burkhard) received teachings on Phowa from Ole Nydahl; between 2005 and 2011, on Nydahl's invitation, Bee occasionally taught in Nydahl's centres around the world on academic topics. Additionally, Bee co-founded a Tibetan Buddhist Studies institute - ITAS - for (mainly) Karma Kagyu practitioners and future translators in Karma Guen (near Vélez-Málaga, Andalusia), a Spanish retreat centre affiliated with the Diamond Way. Bee's connections with Ole Nydahl and the Diamond Way ceased at the end of 2012.

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This is a substantially extended version of the Author's Original Manuscript (AOM) ("preprint") Version of the book chapter, (published December 2016), with kind permission:

- Scherer, Bee (2017). 'A Neo-orthodox Buddhist Movement in Transition: The Diamond Way'. In: E. Gallagher (ed.) 2017. *Visioning New and Minority Religions: Projecting the Future*. London: Routledge, pp. 156-165.

The chapter was written in 2013-2014 and only marginally updated before its long-delayed publication. It largely reflects the status quo as per 2015.

Suggested quotation of the augmented web-version:

- Scherer, Bee (2018). 'Neo-orthodox Tradition and Transition: Lama Ole Nydahl and the Diamond Way' (Extended version of 'A Neo-orthodox Buddhist Movement in Transition: The Diamond Way', in E. Gallagher (ed.) 2017. *Visioning New and Minority Religions: Projecting the Future*. London: Routledge, pp. 156-165), available online at [https://info-buddhism.com/Ole\\_Nydahl\\_and\\_Diamond\\_Way\\_B\\_Scherer.html](https://info-buddhism.com/Ole_Nydahl_and_Diamond_Way_B_Scherer.html)

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