

Bird and Line: Tracing Indian Aesthetics to Find an Ecosophy of Personal Art Practice

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Two birds perfectly winged, syzygies,¹ companions,

Embrace the same tree.

Of them one eats of the nourishing sweet Pippala fruit,²

While the other eats not, but over-sees

— *R̥g Veda 20, Hymn 164, Mandala 1 (Translation by Balaji (2013))*

Artistic Inquiry

I have been sketching birds for a while now wondering to myself why I seem to be captivated with them. The regal pelicans at Jakkur Lake, Bengaluru, India have stilled my mind in the last few months. For a few years now, I have been fascinated with cranes, herons, pelicans, black-headed ibis, cormorants, and the flamingos. Shelducks, pochards, painted storks, darters, egrets, pintails – the list is rather endless. There is something transformative about watching lakes, ponds, birds in their contained movements bursting into sudden flight. I am enthralled as I am curious about their beings. There are many ways in which one can choose to be curious. I for one am curious about the relationship between form and consciousness. I wonder as I watch the wingspans of painted storks and herons, why it is that they choose to embody these forms. Elegance, sensuousness, gracious beauty, lightness of being, and clearly unique temperaments to match their glorious forms, I am forever caught in the elusive line that traces their forms. From beak to wingtip, from webbed feet to ruffled feather, sinuous, light, strong, dynamic line! – still, preening, resting, perching, curious, taking-off, flying, swooping, turning, gliding, turning, landing.

And out of these countless encounters with birds, I quest for my line. It is an impulse to trace their bodies, somehow draw the incredible essence of their form into the very nature of my line; clearly a tall order that I have set for myself. It is much like learning to play a thousand disjointed notes. I draw again and again, broken lines, interwoven with their own idiosyncrasies – bird line, beak line, wing line, webbed feet line, ruffled feather line, tail feather line, rest line, flight line ... wind line....

¹ “Syzygies” refer to pairs of opposites, yoked in conjunction or opposition, connected or corresponding things.

² Fig tree, *Ficus religiosa*.

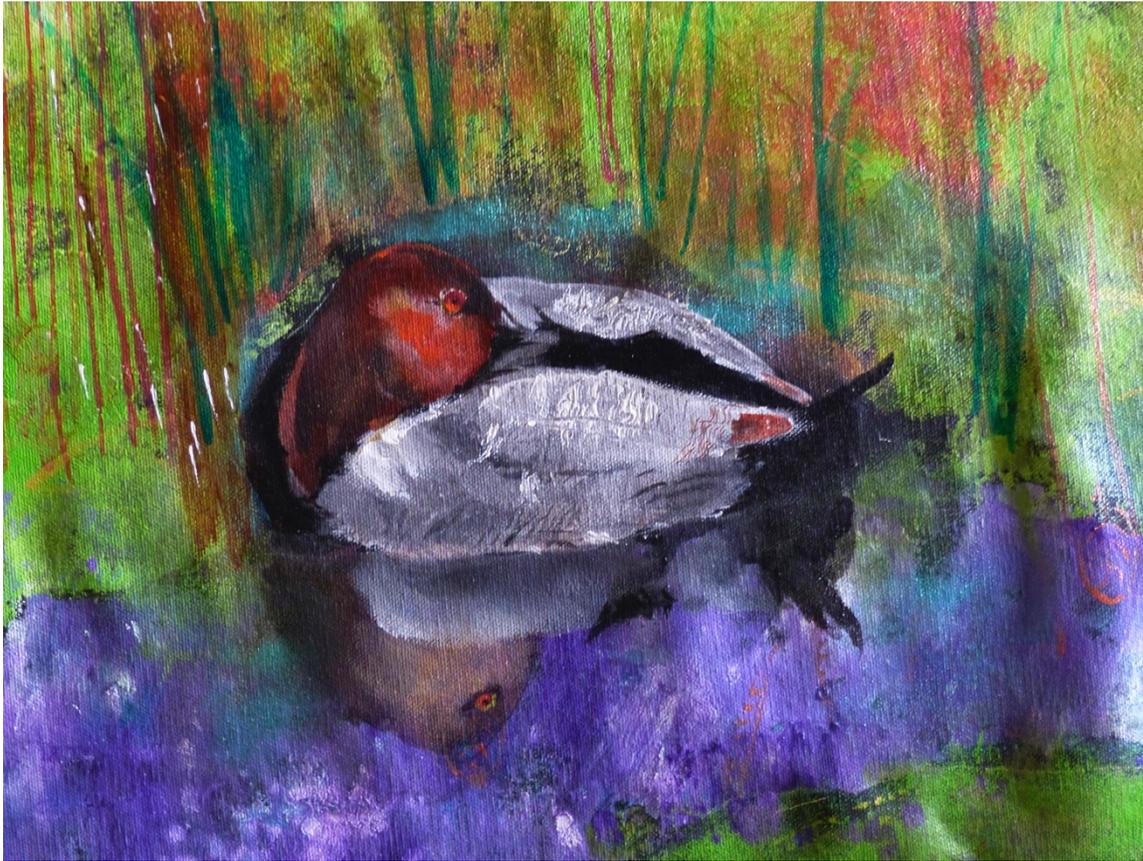


Image: Close up of common pochard from the larger painting Srivi Kalyan, *Nekiçci: Moments of Transformation*, 2016, acrylic and ink on canvas, 2016.

My inquiry into birds occurs through artistic research. Artistic research for me emerges from my training in Indian philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic traditions. My sense of being largely draws upon Hindu worldviews.³ Due to colonialism, as well as rapid growth, globalization, and homogenization that followed, much of these traditions, as well as practices, are lost in common knowledge. Formal education systems largely developed on the lines of western education models, and art colleges, which train students for contemporary art, also further the dissociation with traditional epistemologies, often erasing cultural notions of creativity, imagination, and even intuition. Artists in India, who have for long debated on what constitutes the modern or

³ Van Horn's (2006) reading that, "Hinduism is only a useful conceptual umbrella that indicates diversity more than unity, fluidity rather than stasis, and multiple practices rather than singular orthodoxies" (7) is a critical note to help us to understand that there is a great plurality of thought, and even ontologies, within the frame of Indian thought, philosophy, and art or aesthetics spanning various time periods.

contemporary for Indians, have evolved various directions of inquiry that try to blend the western and eastern, traditional and contemporary. Alongside contemporary artists, craftsmen and traditional artists who follow ancient methods have also survived. There has been much reconstruction of lost or transitioning traditions and methods of practice as well in the eras that have followed India's independence.

In this essay, I begin by describing my artistic inquiry. I delineate this further by positioning it within the cultural framework of Indian aesthetics. I follow this with an outline of my fascination of birds and the particularities of my investigation into birds. I then delve into investigating how theoretical understanding of the body in Indian tradition and in classical dance training informs the sensorial experiences that I describe. This section engages with how to train the body for artistic practice. In unraveling the body, I evoke notions of porosity that occur at points of unfolding and infolding of consciousness and elaborate this process through notions of being as well as the epistemologies that govern perception of self and reality in Indian frameworks. From these, I evolve a method of eco-art practice articulated in the final section.

Line as an element of art, unraveled through Indian categories of practice, is the pivot that guides this essay. Using "line" as my method and tool of inquiry, I deepen my observation of birds at two levels: one external, which teaches me to observe biological characteristics and behavior patterns of different species; the other is internal, observing a bird in interiority, the inner space of the heart, where one transcends external differences to find unity of being. This exercise of drawing at two levels is driven by a simple purpose: to find *rta*, the cosmic order. Cultivating a deep inner perception that is resonant with the natural order of the world (*rta*) is at the heart of training in the arts in the Indian tradition. The conceptualization of this natural order extends into the Indian notion of truth (*satyam*) drawn from these cosmic ecological limits. From *rta* and *satyam* come the notion of the way of life and right actions (*dharma*) (Khanna 2004, 2). Training to trace the line of interiority, of the essence of life through artistic practice, is the vital skill that drives Indian artists, who are drawn by the traditional ontologies where oneness of all life is at the heart of perception.

Developing an Artistic Inquiry and Research Practice Using Key Principles in Traditional Indian Aesthetics

Three key principles of Indian aesthetics help me construct my artistic research into birds and line. The first principle considers the arts as a spiritual exercise that leads to inner transformation and helps in the realization of the universal principle that underlies the matrix of life (Vatsyayan 1977, 5; Kak 2015). The inner and outer, the physical and the psychical are correlated to imbue suggestiveness of this universal being through rhythm in Indian arts. The rhythms are lines in motion. This principle translates in four ways within this inquiry:

- Bird watching becomes an exercise that seeks out patterns of connections between the inner self and the outer encounters with birds;
- Birds become a conduit to observe the underlying matrix of life becoming an embodied experience that allows for drawing the being of the bird into oneself;
- Translating birds into artistic forms becomes an engagement with symbolism, fusing psychological, metaphysical, and physical layers of experiences with birds;
- Rhythms and lines become tools of translation and inform the approach to working with form, colour, texture, patterns, and composition.

The second principle to consider is that Indian arts are interrelated through underlying philosophical principles (Vatsyayan 1977, 8). This interrelated and integrated approach has led to a diverse set of artistic forms across architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, and theatre that are unified in principle. In practice, I work with lyrical prose and poetry, dance, painting, illustration, and installation art. These works are often constructed in parallel with each other, the principles, techniques, and aesthetics of one art form informing the other. This approach allows me to engage with birds, capturing different facets of my encounters with them. A grey heron in painting, in lyrical prose and in movement, each tease out a transformation in the inner consciousness through the possibilities of the media. The two-dimensional canvas of a painting expands and flows into the three-dimensional space of dance, seamlessly breaking one boundary and entering another. Poetry and lyrical prose open consciousness to a layered time-space where the psychological and physical meet to create new meaning through a reflective and conscious engagement. Taken together, the principle of interrelatedness of the arts allows for deeper meaning making and creative expression, where one can tease out an encounter with birds as not only an empirical encounter but an embodied, psychological, and metaphysical one, allowing for the rich interrelationships between beings to unfold in artistic form.

The third principle is the approach to aesthetic emotion in classical Indian aesthetics. Keeping in mind the first principle, the artist prepares themselves for a state of balance and rest (*hṛdayaviśrānti*) before beginning any artistic work. This is fundamental to building practice in the arts from a traditional perspective. The intention of this approach to practice is for the artist to transcend subjective emotion in order to translate and depict universality of emotion (Vatsyayan 1977, 6-21). This translates into an in-depth training in the study of emotions in traditional art, particularly dance and theatre forms. The *rasa* theory, which is fundamental to Indian aesthetics, explores primary emotional states, secondary and transitory states, contexts, and involuntary physical expressions that accompany emotions in great depth. The artist trains to interpret nuances of emotion in varied contexts as they build their repertoire. Aesthetic emotion is considered intrinsically different from emotion in real life and aesthetic experience distinct from experience in the empirical world (Vatsyayan 1977, 7). Aesthetic emotion offers a state of disconnectedness to ponder and reflect upon the meaning of an experience. It is in the

light of such aesthetic emotion that bird watching transforms from an empirical encounter into an aesthetic one. In an aesthetic encounter, multiple realities of the inner and the outer experience fuse to emerge in mythical, mystical, or metaphysical frames that integrate the biological and empirical experiences with the subjective and intuitive ones. Aesthetic emotion is considered a way to find one's resonance with the universal matrix, and the ultimate experience of such an aesthetic emotion is seen as bliss. The artist's training in the study and interpretation of emotions allows them to work from an emotional state of rest and balance, tuning into stillness and silence that are in resonance with the underlying matrix of life. In working with birds, I investigate the challenges faced by birds in the industrial world, the impact of pollution on their lives, their behaviours, flight patterns, and other details. I also work my way through varied emotions like grief, anger, and sorrow on one end, and beauty, joy, and wonder on the other. The emotions collide with each other for long periods of time, amidst which I find moments of quiet contemplation and stillness. The initial states of emotional balance that I achieve are unstable and transitory. Over years of observation, sketching, and contemplation, I achieve more stable periods of emotional balance that mature into aesthetic emotion.

These three key principles thus become the core of building my artistic processes and practice. They also help me integrate diverse styles of artistic practice through a cultural aesthetic paradigm bringing together wildlife and naturalistic art with symbolic work. These three key principles integrate the mind-body complex and tune them to resonate with the invisible rhythm of an underlying universal matrix. They quiet the mind and provide tools for continuous engagement, expression, and language to interpret our encounters with ourselves and the world at large. An embodied ecosophical language of creative expression and perception is embedded in these principles.

Birds as a Point of Artistic Investigation

My artistic investigation of birds has three aspects of form and representation that entwine to build a framework for artistic research: birds as biological beings, birds as symbolism, and birds as mythical⁴ creatures. As a methodological framework for artistic practice, I work with moments of mystical and metaphysical experiences. I cultivate bird watching, and build strong naturalistic encounters with birds, ecological understanding of their behaviours, and informed perception, followed by a philosophical and aesthetic understanding and interpretation that brings together my mystical experiences with the presence of the bird and its possible translation in the arts. I draw, paint, write poetry, and sometimes work out specific movement exercises in order to translate these experiences with birds.

⁴ Myth, as interpreted here, indicates a language that is spoken silently, allowing for the expression of the inexpressible (Snodgrass 1992, 6).

Birds fascinate me for the simple reason that they can fly. My observations and encounters with birds allow me to experience lightness of being, and an inner soaring of emotions. In particular, three ideas of symbolism that emerge in the Indian mystical and philosophical traditions have been a critical link to my observation and investigation of birds. The gander (*haṃsa*) is considered a symbol of in-breath and out-breath. It represents the cycles of manifestation, dissolution, and balance. It is a symbol of self-realization that enables the insight that the cosmos and the individual are one: “The ingoing breath (*apāna*) makes the sound *haṃ*, the outgoing breath (*prāṇa*) makes the sound *sa*, and the *yogin* who listens to the Gander murmuring its own name in the inflow and the outflow of his breathing realizes the Bird’s indwelling presence, since *haṃ-sa-haṃ-sa ...* is also *sa-‘haṃ-sa-‘haṃ ...* ‘This is I.’ Having become one with the Sunbird of his Breath, the *yogin* is called a *parama-haṃsa*, ‘a great Gander’” (Snodgrass 1992, 301). This symbolism is extended further and the *haṃsa* is considered to be none other than Lord Viṣṇu (one of the most important Gods of the Hindu Pantheon), representing manifestation and dissolution of the cosmos (Snodgrass 1992, 301).

In Indian thought, myth, ritual, and philosophy are deeply entwined. The artistic expression of truths that are mystical, metaphysical, or beyond the rational is constructed in the language of the myths. Birds in their representation in myths draw upon the biological aspects of the bird, while infusing them with metaphysical truths.

As an artist, working with birds, I explore these three aspects – birds as biological beings, birds as symbols, and birds as mythical creatures – in the quest for a new framework of artistic research. Using line as a tool and method helps to discover an artistic process that leads to visual/textual/performance outcomes that are representative of the biological, mystical, and metaphysical layers of reality. Line as a tool is symbolic of breath, as well as thread that connects all life (explored in more detail below). Working with line to encounter birds allows for artistic research that looks to express the ineffable about our connection with life and helps to break our boundaries of perception and form to find resonance with life.

I observe birds and bird behavior extensively in their natural environments: alone, in flight, feeding their young, preening, dead, and subject to environmental changes and constraints. As I observe birds, I abstract the movements of the birds in two ways: one, through the act of drawing, and the other, through moving my body using dance. For instance, my act of drawing my observations of different species of birds involves looking for details of form, behaviour, and expression in each bird. A tailorbird, a green bee-eater, an owl, a kite, a crow, a heron, a peacock, and an ostrich are each varied in their forms, expressions, sizes, colours, weights, and flight. Each form has a particular place in the food chain, and each has a presence that is different from the other. The kite’s silent swirling of the skies and sharp shriek with its stark strength are very different from the lightness of flight of the tailorbird, whose weight does not even bend a leaf that it alights on. In being and becoming one with the bird, I draw upon my perception and draw in the presence allowing the bird to fill my body and consciousness. While using dance to trace bird forms and behaviors, the fluidity of the lines transforms my breath and the tangible form of

my body to a malleable one moving in space. The lines I emerge through dancing, I consciously translate back into my drawing on paper.

The Body in Training

I trained for several years in the classical dance tradition of Bharatanatyam alongside learning textual verses. One of the verses that captures the flow of line between body and mind, exterior and interior, gross and subtle, is from *Abhinaya Darpaṇa* (Nandikeśvara, Coomaraswamy, and Gōpālakrishna 1977, 17), one of the critical texts for Indian dance practices:

*Yato hasta stato dṛṣṭir yato dṛṣṭi stato manaḥ/
yato mana stato bhāvo yato bhāva stato rasaḥ*// (Rajendran, 2007, xvi)

A literal translation of this reads as

*Where the hands are, there go the eyes
where the eyes are, there goes the mind
where the mind goes, there arises feeling
and where there is feeling, the essence is evoked.*⁵

This is succinctly a method for body-mind-consciousness alignment. This training is essentially the drawing of the tacit line that invites the exterior into the interior and vice versa. Training in Bharatanatyam or any of the other Indian dance forms would involve continuous practice to achieve a perfection of this line that moves seamlessly from gross to subtle states in the body-mind continuum.⁶

For the traditional Indian Asian artist, creative training is about bringing the physical, emotional, mental, cosmological, and philosophical aspects of one's existence into a single "body" that is capable of both experience and expression. While artistic practices are within the larger frame of

⁵ I have translated this verse based on my training as a dancer and following Coomaraswamy's translation of the verse by Nandikeśvara in Nandikeśvara, Coomaraswamy, and Gopalakrishna [1917] 1977, 17.

⁶ Indian thought (in *Advaita Vedānta* and its roots in Upaniṣads) identifies the body in its gross (*sthūla*), subtle (*sūkṣma*), and causal (*kāraṇa*) states (Bäumer 2001, 114-115). The gross body, made of the five gross elements, fire, earth, space, water, and wind, is subject to change and seen only as a temporary residence for a life. The subtle body is made of matter comprised of all five subtle elements, and constitutes the five sense organs, the five organs of action, five life forces, and the four internal organs – mind-heart (*manas*), discerning intellect (*buddhi*), consciousness and memory (*cit*), and ego/self (*ahaṃkāra*) (Sivananda 2012, 165-170). The causal body is the subtlest of the bodies and the potential of being before it takes form in subtle or gross states. This conceptualization of the body deepens experience in several layers. The training required for the body, be it through yoga as a form, or through artistic traditions, takes into account the training of the gross, subtle, and causal bodies.

spiritual, meditative practices, the artist's role remains sensual and celebratory, rather than involving withdrawal. In this light, the artist often draws from diverse traditions of Indian thought rather than one particular school, amalgamating her expressions often through myth and storytelling. Most training is rooted in stillness and equilibrium that brings a state of hyperawareness and allows one to tune in to the natural flow and order of life.

Trained in this traditional classical dance form, the three-dimensional dynamic line that is moving in space is an important guiding force in my two dimensional visual painting work, as well as in my installation work. I understand line as a dynamic force through the felt experience of my body trying to retain the structural qualities of curve, straight, and distortion, as well as the character of the five gross elements: fire, earth, space, water, and wind. Each element can be observed in its various dimensions; for example, wind that is gentle, just a zephyr, wind before the storm, the calm of the storm, wind flowing through the body, wind lifting water, wind swirling, wind creating conversations among leaves.... Close observations as one experiences wind in its many expressions allow one to create a responsive body in tune with each kind of wind. Wind as one experiences while listening to the breath of a loved one, wind that indicates familiarity and unfamiliarity of the person we may encounter, wind in different seasons – each of these can be represented by the body in different ways. Our bodies are shaped by the elements. Careful observation, acknowledgement and conscious practice allows one to find ways to train the body in response to all life around us. The line that would exemplify fire would be very different from one that would embody wind. However, if one were to express a candle flame dancing, one encounters both fire and wind, a gentle fire, swaying to a gentle wind. This fire has a still axis and hence a gentle swaying line, where the lower body is still and the upper body sways in a contained movement, which could be representative of a candle flame. This would be very different than a raging forest fire, where there is great dynamism to both fire and wind, requiring dynamic movements across a stage. The line here is energetic, forceful, uncontained, bold, and fierce. It could be both terrifying and glorious in terms of its immensity. A raging forest fire, however, could be represented through full body movement, leaps, and large sweeping movements. The artist's training lies in observing fire as the candle flame as well as fire as the forest fire, knowing how the body can be disciplined to express the possibilities of both forms of fire. Using line rather than any of the other elements of form is a unique practice, as line acts as a thread that connects all life, the thread of breath, the vibration of which creates form. The in-breath and out-breath, the life-force (*Prāna*), provides the guiding axial line that can flow in and out of everything that is living. Visualizing line as an interconnecting thread is one of the many intuitive practices that comes from the tradition.

Years of practicing with the body have taught me to inquire into line in its varied dimensions to embody the presence, physical characteristics, and emotional qualities felt while intuiting the life-force of another being. For instance, when representing an old heron that I observed at Sukhna Lake, Chandigarh, what I sensed in the being was a quiet exhaustion, an extraordinary patience and waiting, a body that is content in its aging, an acceptance and seeming pleasure of

the everyday. As I photographed the heron, for a moment our gazes met each other. At that moment, there is a beautiful transfer of these aspects of the being of the heron into me as a seamless exchange. And when I come back to draw – or perform – the presence of the heron, it is an act of calling forth its being back into a manifestation in creative expression.

Back home, I watch the painted storks in Jakkur Lake for a long time. The most evocative of these moments of observation leads me to spot a mother bird feeding her young one. Her actions are methodical as she feeds the chick with her long beak. The hungry little one opens her beak, raucous and impatient. Their feeding seems to go on for over fifteen minutes as I watch. In the mother bird there is a perfect coordination of movements. And as I stand by observing, I learn this coordination in my mind. I work on my body movements, figuring out the distance between my feet that will enable a stance akin to that of the stork, the sway in the dipping, bending, and rising of the neck through the feeding process, the subtle movements that show the care involved in the feeding process. Alongside floats an awareness of the patience that the bird has, and the training that she offers her young one. There is a certain intimacy in the flow of this knowledge that happens through the porous channels of the gross body, subtle body, and causal body. In this light, the act of painting becomes very much an act of dancing in my work.

Line as a Tool, Method, and Philosophy

The artist's quest for line within this framework lies in an essential question: what is it that the line will delineate, structure, enumerate, separate, enclose, or bring to the vision? The quest for line is, by the nature of this inquiry, a sacred and ritual act of rediscovering, suggesting, revealing, and representing cosmic harmony in form and symbol. To the artist, the quest for line is a two-fold action. On the one hand, there is a manifestation of the cosmic harmony as an independent outcome, which can be enjoyed and experienced by the spectator. On the other hand, in order to create such a line, the artist must be able to tune their body and mind beyond technical skill to experience this reality deep within themselves. Cultivating the mind through intense practice (*sādhana*) is an action that allows negating all the things that can hinder the flow of reality/cosmic harmony through the artist's body. The relationship between the artist's body-mind and the line that is drawn is like a dance of entwined forces. And the act of perceiving the outcome remains within the ritual of perception, where each time the aesthete/artist looks at the work of art/outcome, what they allow within themselves is the rich flow of this inner truth as experienced by the artist. The act of perception is ritual performance and always suffused with inner breath of being, the life force that flows through everything. Line is a guide, as much as it is an outcome, becoming visible form as well as metaphorical engagement for both artist and aesthete.

Line qualities are defined by their strength and direction, and are related to the five gross elements (*pañcamāhabhūtas*): "There exists a correlation between the five elements (*bhūta*), their subtle forms (*tanmātra*, i.e., *śabda* or sound, *sparśa* or touch, *rūpa* or form, *rasa* or taste, and *gandha* or smell), and the corresponding sense organs which perceive them (*indriya*)"

(Baümer 1996, xv). Line character can also denote moral qualities. A straight line indicates honesty and straightforwardness; a crooked line could indicate dishonesty, a curved line a sense of both inner and outer beauty (Baümer 2002, 2).

To me as an artist, this pursuit of line that is in alignment with the elements, captures essence and character of the form, and meditates as well as mediates between form and expression. Line (*rekhā*) is synonymous with *sutra*, the thread that links, binds, and interweaves all life. In this understanding of line, the idea of interdependence and connectedness of life emerges. As an artist draws a line that is well practiced and emerged from countless hours of resonance with life, they begin to perceive the subtle line-thread of breath (*prāna*), the cosmic in-breath and out-breath, and the individual in-breath and out-breath. And this perception allows them to experience the interconnectedness of life through line. The written word too is line, both as poetry or text and as calligraphy. The dancer is also expected to practice line (*rekhā*).

The *chitrasūtra* of the *Vishṇudharmmotara purāṇa* (dated between the second century BCE and second century CE) discusses the link between dance and painting:

What is meant by the derivation of painting from dancing is the movement in common to both these expressive forms; it asserts itself in purity through dancing, it guides the hand of the artist, who knows how to paint figures, as if breathing, the wind as blowing, the fire as blazing, and the streamers as fluttering. The moving force, the vital breath, the life-movement (*chetanā*), that is what is expected to be seen in the work of a painter, to make it alive with rhythm and expression. Imagination, observation and the expressive force of rhythm are meant by the legends of the origin of painting, to be its essential features. (Kramrisch 1924, 10)

The methods indicated in this text clearly focus on both the visible and the tacit invisible, the life-movement and essence of a subject. The artist's capacity to delineate the invisible (*adr̥ṣṭā*) in artistic form through the quality of line is discussed in terms of suggestiveness, symbolism, and detailing (Kramrisch 1924, 10). In a conversation noted in the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, Sage Pippalāda tells his students that the act of using a line to divide space points out the sacred nature of drawing a line and how it is as powerful as the act of creation (Baümer 2002, 21). Line is the essence of all definite forms in art. Line, *rekhā*, is both structural and symbolic, and is essential to delineate a sacred space in both two and three dimensions. The creation of line is both "ritual and artistic action" (Baümer 2002, 35).

For the artist, working with line is a philosophical inquiry. In the drawing of mystical diagrams, *yantras* or *maṇḍalas*, line creates a threshold between "inner sacred space" and "outer unordered space" (Baümer 2002, 12). Lines create a highly charged symbolic space. The line is often an intuitive command that the Indian artist strives to arrive at. Deepening perception to observe the nature of consciousness implies capturing the life-line/breath-line of any subject through and beyond its form imbuing the final drawing with presence/manifestation. The life-

line is the line of universal order and rhythm, or an intuitive perception of Indian categories of *Brahman*, *Ātman*, or *Puruṣa*⁷ that indicate a universal consciousness. Framed in mysticism, poets seeking language to interpret these ineffable experiences of feeling oneness with a universal consciousness make recourse to poetic metaphor, paradox, and negation (Matilal 1990, 142-155). In visual art too, the same methods are used to express the ineffable. The line creates metaphor and a paradox of what it delineates. It negates what the essence is not. It hides and plays with form to indicate the presence of the other.

The artist is therefore not looking for likeness of form, but is really gathering the essence of a form in relation to the subject's consciousness as perceived through the artist's deep intuitive porosity. This "essence" as perceived by the artist could be layered and different in each instance of creative process and expression. The perception of the rhythm and vital breath that pervades all life forms and finding a way to tune into that with one's own rhythm, finding the same frequency and staying in that space of rest and equilibrium while creating, is at the core of the practice. However, the power of the arts lies in the celebration of the sensual world of diversity and procreation and, hence, essence is also the distinguishing factor of a bird, its behavior, its form and movement, its presence in a landscape.

When the artist and the bird form a tacit relationship, the intersubjective nature of the experience is an act of breathing in the being and presence of the other into oneself, allowing for an intimate yet mystical understanding of the other. Emotions can permeate through the artist in such moments, the physicality, presence, tension, and actions of the body of the other. Silent communication of acceptance or denial of the other can also permeate through. These would be some of the basic experiences that are possibly experienced by not just artists, but many naturalists as well. These mystic experiences can happen in fractions of seconds, when a moment of wisdom can flash through, where there can be healing from grief, understanding how the presence and being of the bird can offer a resolution to a conflict that is in an altogether different human dimension. Each encounter is unique, and each presence leads to a different experience. For instance, my observation of grey herons brought about a strength in the body that allowed for physical healing, whereas my observation of tailorbirds led to unburdening of grief and sorrows that had been weighing me down. The artist achieves this ability to draw in the other by training their own consciousness to be still so that the other can permeate through.

Thus, in this worldview, the act of drawing a line is a ritual – sacred yet artistic. For the artist, drawing the line is a tool that helps them to separate the universal consciousness from personal consciousness by delineating their boundaries. However, drawing a line also allows the artist to meld back into the universal consciousness again. The artist does this by drawing the essence of a form, the line of life/breath, not its muscular structure but the subtle line that flows through

⁷ *Brahman*, *Ātman*, and *Puruṣa* are complex concepts in Indian philosophy that indicate cosmic being or self, consciousness, and universal principle. *Brahman* refers to the ultimate reality, *Ātman* refers to the universal self that is identical to the innermost essence of the individual self, and *Puruṣa* refers to cosmic self or cosmic consciousness.

the form. This line of life is essentially an experience of the universal consciousness, which the artist then finds resonance in.

I spend a lot of time sketching the mythical bird Jatayu, considered to be the Indian vulture (now an endangered species) and the myth of how Jatayu fights to save Sita, the heroine of the epic Ramayana, from Ravana who abducts her. Sita is deeply moved by the valiant battle of Jatayu and prays for his salvation at the end of the battle when he falls down, his wings slashed by Ravana. I oscillate my inquiries into meaning-making between the endangered species and its intimate connection with human life in Indian myth. To find my lines, I move between my observations of the vulture in quick sightings in Bandipur and subsequent research through films and photographs. The massiveness of the bird, its energy and force, are guiding elements, its long wing span and the fact that it is a scavenger, something that is protective through its capacity to clean up the dead carcasses, calls out to me. I play with my compositions of the relationship between woman and bird, on what is essentially the battleground of the sky. The line that delineates Sita and the line that delineates Jatayu contrast, and yet flow between each other. Imagining these lines and the relationships that they can evoke took me several weeks of sketching. The line that started with tremendous force and weight in wingspan and size, eventually gentled into a strong, contained yet supple line for the bird, a line that indicates not only the bird, but its compassion as indicated in the myth. This is the tacit line, a line that needs to be suggestive, hidden, and yet evocative. Working with the myth allows rediscovering human relationships with the natural world in all its intimacy and opens doorways to perception of the other. It allows one to travel into human imagination, beliefs, and values to discover the lines of relationship between human and bird, and how each shapes the other.

Process/Journey

I pause at this moment to draw back and ask what it means to unravel the world through this framework of aesthetic experience. What are the steps and methods, the process of this particular journey? What is “being” in this process and what are the actions of this “being”?

My quest is to understand my relationship with birds, but my training is to see them in interiority as well as exteriority. I grapple with the perceptions that arise from two different states of seeing/being. I am aware of a sensorial consciousness at one level in my external observations, but I am drawn again and again into something that is hinting at a cosmic order of oneness, a seeing that teases innerness. I am doubtful of these emotions and experiential states when I begin my research. My observations are tentative, often tacit, not framed in words. While I have an implicit training in Indian arts, particularly Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance from South India, I am yet to uncover either the knowledge framework or notion of being that guides my practice. My initial research is led completely by the assurance of practice and journaling about practice. I have no method to follow, except one guided by intuition, emotion, and a deeper cognition of subtle being.

I start with my senses, my body, and its responses to birds. Two of my poems (written in 2017) record some of these journeys:

1

The paradise flycatcher

lights up the tree

She comes by, converses with it

flies from branch to branch

and leaves.

Is it a flowing river or tree root,

the prana⁸ is the same, it feels like

my body, that root, lake, river

and bird in flight!

2

Sometimes all one needs

is that great tit

taking over

mind and body

with the lightness of his

being

on a stark

leafless tree.

Life,

abundance,

hope,

new direction!

⁸ Breath

These observations leave me overwhelmed, frustrated, and contented. Contentment comes from my experience, but I struggle to understand how this experience happens. So I start to inquire into the nature of my experience. I ask what happens when I watch a bird. I slow myself down to articulate. However, this journey takes a few years to unravel each layer of my observation. There may yet be layers unrevealed to me. I find the need to trace my perception to my own traditional, ontological roots.

In reflecting on the moment of writing the poem and the poem itself, I jot down my notes.

I see a bird – in the first poem above it is a paradise flycatcher. As I am observing the bird, my mind has captured all the distinct characteristics that help me identify the birds. The rufous-coloured, short-tailed female paradise flycatcher is sitting on the branch of *Ficus benghalensis*. However, my observation is tracing the line of the paradise flycatcher to the hanging roots of the banyan, to the spreading branches, all the way down to some of the exposed roots. I am sitting at the base of these magnificent roots. I have just walked down from a small lake, mostly dry in the summer season when I visited The Valley School.⁹ There is also a distant memory of another river and banyan, a common sight in rural India. I realize that in bringing the loop of memory, my mind-heart (*ullam*) has strayed to another physical landscape. This memory recalls another sighting of the Indian paradise flycatcher elsewhere, that one was a magnificent male with its long tail.

Somehow, I keep tracing all these diverse lines into my heart.... This is intrinsic processing of the scene in front of me. I am suddenly very sensitive to and conscious of my breathing, which otherwise remains an unconscious everyday process in the background. This hyperawareness of breath makes me deeply connected to the elemental wind flowing in and out of all life forms. I find through this breath, through the flow of wind, a flow of life. I have now stopped tracing the physical form of the bird from my external perception and am watching the bird through my inner eye. This is a seamless process. But wind is not the only element that draws the relationship between the outer and the inner. Water reveals itself as the sustaining force of life. As the bird in flight moves through the sky, space and void are the elements that get added to my perception. But I remember again that the paradise flycatcher lights up the tree in my poem, so fire was integral to my perception. The roots of the banyan are in this rich Indian brownish-red soil. The earth is the most forceful element because she connects us all to the ground. This approach to perception that entwines the outer and inner through the elements into a singular whole becomes evident to me in my perception.

However, my experience does not stop in this entwining. It moves into yet another dimension – this I see as a transformation of consciousness. I have redefined in and through this experience the contours of my body and its physicality. This is what transforms my experience of birding. I have somehow managed to draw the paradise flycatcher into my innerness, the specificity of its

⁹ The Valley School is one the schools established by philosopher J. Krishnamurti in Bangalore and has a large part of its campus devoted to afforestation work.

physical contours have shifted the specificity of mine. I have now within me a paradise flycatcher-size contour that teases the nature of my consciousness and my perception of the bird's consciousness. However, with the great tit, which I spot on the second day, I am already in a highly sensitized state. I watch, and the innerness of the bird hits me straightaway. The reverse process happens in this experience. I first emerge in lightness of being that I draw from the bird, and then slowly move into exteriority – I am able to contemplate the expanse of life with an inner lightness and quietude. The first experience led to intense lines that converged, the second experience to light, gentle lines that expanded. There is simultaneity of space-time that characterizes this experience.

These encounters have helped me to unfold several aspects of my being. At the same time, they have led to reflective processes that draw other beings into me. Unfolding and infolding occur simultaneously, making me more receptive to the world around and to hidden layers of my own being. I use the word unfolding to describe expansion of senses and the word infolding to describe internalization of senses. I thus return to the Indian philosophical and aesthetic theories expounded earlier, as well as my personal practice, to understand these sensorial experiences that I have encountered.

Unfolding and Infolding

Kapila Vatsyayan notes in her seminal work *The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts* (1997), that the notion of senses, *indriyas*, is of paramount importance to understand the Indian notions of training the senses and the methodology of perception and action that unravels from this. There is a constant call to perfection of the senses in order to transcend the world of sense and form to contemplate on the subtler reality, largely articulated by the notion of *Brahman*. An inquiry into both philosophical and aesthetic traditions that arise from Vedic ontology and epistemology follow a certain pathway. A paradoxical and metaphorical approach to experiencing allows for acuity in unfolding, and infolding, of the senses. Once the senses have been heightened and quieted, the ground for transcendence is prepared. This is not a denial of body or senses, but an intensified way of creating co-relationships between the inner and the outer, the subtle and the gross, energy and elements. From this arises an organic system where the senses correspond to various elements, landscapes, cosmic bodies. The microcosm is mapped on to the macrocosm (Vatsyayan1997, 11-13). The nature of aesthetic experience, both the training as artist and aesthete, thus emerge from correlation, correspondence, exchange, and a quieting of sensorial experience at the gross level to hear the subtler senses at play in the inner self, *antarātman*. However, “the impact of the outer phenomena on the senses is never replicated in the form of artifacts but its inherent substance and essence is experienced in the spirit of the artist and subsequently expressed through the particular art form” (Sthapati 2002, xix).

The nature of aesthetic experience is a key to unfolding consciousness as it permeates, flits through, or pervades the mind-body continuum. In my work, I pursue the enquiry of aesthetic experience to unravel the threads of ecological consciousness. My inquiry is twofold: one is to understand the very nature of the aesthetic experience; the second is to evolve techniques and methods of depicting form, space, embodiment, and language. This unfolding requires one to see beyond the limitations of Cartesian duality to find the essential experience that one's consciousness undergoes and the true nature of being. Any seeing includes an empathetic, psychical, or metaphysical vision of the interrelatedness of beings as denoted by the notion that "everything is related to the whole" (*Sarvam sarvātmakam*) (Baümer 2001, xiii).

The question of how one could experience reality when one is part of the whole, a microcosm within the macrocosm, is a great paradox that engages Hindu philosophy and aesthetics at the core. How can an individual comprehend the whole, or how can there be an experience of completeness and totality? This infolding and unfolding of the cosmos within oneself, where one can experience the outer reality in one's own being in which the separation between the inner and the outer dissolves, is at the crux of all action that emerges in this worldview. The paradoxical nature of the question is also answered through metaphor and paradox with the imagery of two birds (*Rg Veda, Mūṇḍaka Upaniṣad*), paralleling the experiencer and the seer, which are considered inseparable, friends, alike. One experiences, enjoying life, the other oversees without indulging and participating. They are both one. When one realizes that the witness is the same as the witnessed, there is a moment when they diffuse into each other, experiencing the primordial whole. This porous experiencing of totality is in Indian thought seen as the height of experience.

This paradoxical metaphor, the infolding and unfolding of cosmos into self and vice versa, forms the crux of all aesthetic training. A well-trained artist uses the sensorial realm of experience, unfolding this sensorial world through metaphors, iconography, symbolism, physical extrapolation of the sensorial realm and its emotional counterparts, to celebrate oneness of the inner and the outer. The image of the dancing *Śiva, Naṭarāja*,¹⁰ embodies this principle as *Śiva* dances on the lotus, considered the innermost heart of the devotee, and within an aureole of flames considered the cosmos. The equilibrium between the two allowing multi-level, multi-dimensional infolding and unfolding back and forth into states of oneness becomes a single iconographic translation of the essence and meaning of life as seen within this ontology.

Watching a bird does not stop with its outer form or precision of flight. It turns and morphs into an inquiry into line, the *sūtra*, an attempt to find the bird in its link to the line that connects all of us between sky, earth, and inner self, the *adhidhaivika* (cosmic), *adhibhautika* (terrestrial), and *adhyātmika* (personal), the tripartite levels of reality perception as mapped in Vedic thought (Baümer 2001, xiii). The fourth concept *ādhiyajña* (ritual sacrifice indicating inner transformation)

¹⁰ *Naṭarāja* is a symbolic form of the Hindu God *Śiva* as a dancer. A single iconographic image combines his roles as a creator, preserver, and destroyer in a never-ending cycle of time.

extends the tripartite reality into a creative space where transformations into oneness can happen (Subash Kak, personal email communication, January 31, 2017). The part and the whole, the microcosm and macrocosm, the finite and the infinite, the one and the many are entwined, interwoven, diffused, in a flow of exchange, paradoxically both existent and non-existent. Great emotion suffuses the being, devoid of all character of joy or sorrow, and yet it rises at the confluence of both. The transcendent emotion and aesthetic emotion coalesce into deep experiencing of multiple levels of interconnectedness.



Image: Stylized rendering capturing the quirky attitudes of two babblers, Srivi Kalyan, *Two Babblers*, 2014, pen and ink.

Aesthetic Method Towards Ecological Consciousness

Ecological consciousness in Indian thought is interwoven with ethics of everyday life. Nature and culture are entwined and this principle is echoed in philosophy and aesthetics: “The enunciation of the absolute kinship of Nature with Man marks the most important advance in the whole history of Indian thought” (Hiriyanna 1954, 3). It is from this sense of kinship that artistic processes have been evolved in traditional Indian thought. There is a seamless flow that connects the individual self with the larger environment and cosmos. Arne Naess is said to have drawn his notion of Self-realisation from Gandhi and adapted it to evolve his own ideas. His notion of the self goes back to *Advaita Vedānta* and Indian philosophical frameworks of self.

Naess always capitalized it thus: Self-realization. And he metaphysically grounded the distinction between self- and Self-realization in the Sanskrit distinction between the *jīva* (the narrow self) and the *ātman* (the universal Self). Practically speaking, Self-realization in Ecosophy T is attained when one realizes that oneself (or perhaps better oneSelf) is embedded in one’s environment and continuous with it. (Calicott 2014, 382)

While line seems too simple a process to comprehend this kinship between human and the natural world, it is both tool and method that allows for a deeper intuition to emerge in consciousness and cognition. The method of practice towards eco-art that I then arrive at, emerges through Indian categories. In what follows, I give a broad overview of this method.

1. **Contemplation:** Self, Transformation as Ritual, Practice, and Action

Self in Indian thought is innerness, and simultaneously all pervasively cosmic. The inner and the outer are intrinsically bound in this conception of reality, nature, and consciousness. *Uḷlam* (heart) and *ātman* (universal self) are two concepts I use to contemplate on the self. Any creative act is a *yajña*, a ritual act of transformation that happens through intense meditative practice (*sādhanā*). All of these can be processed only in inner space (*antarhrdaya ākāśa*) and hence mapping consciousness within this expansive inner space is critical to both perception and action (Baümer 1992, xv).

Actions: Watch self, meditate on it, observe it. As in the Vedic poem of the two birds, cultivate the witness within the self as the observer. Create art as an action of contemplating the creative essence of life; allow this action to tune being into a state of high vibrating force that creates a state ready for self-transformation. Allow the high level of awareness that is created in this process to inform all action, by activating the inner compass of the heart.

2. **Transience:** *Dvāram* (Doorway), Body Contour, and Elements of Transaction

Transformation can only happen at moments of transience, a shift in being. This time is linked

to doorways (*dvāram*) where transitions occur in consciousness. In Indian thought the relationship between body and life form the very basis of being. The body is celebrated for giving us the experience of enjoying the creative origin of life through our own contours. Space. Time. Form. Line. Energy become elements of transaction that allow transmutation between forms, states of being, states of consciousness, as well as realities.

Actions: Become aware of liminal boundaries where change can occur. This requires the ability to observe time and space in highly nuanced packets of spatiality, duration, stillness, dynamism, void, and fullness. Observe these boundaries at the interface of the inner and outer to see when, where, and how seamless exchanges can happen between the two.

3. **Creativity:** Integral Multiplicity, Materiality, Paradox

The cosmic, the terrestrial, and the self are bound to each other in the Indian view of reality. The correspondences that one can draw across all living and non-living forms in all layers of reality lead to the idea of plurality arising from oneness. This provides the framework for infinity and recursion in creativity. The paradox (*māya*) of observing one in the many and many in the one, allows for playfulness (*līla*) in our unraveling of creativity.

Actions: Observe the threads that bind life together, observe multiplicity while reading oneness. Draw and sketch to capture these. Look for diverse ways to represent plurality and oneness. Discover different artistic devices to represent these states. Be aware of how the body is porous and how it is connected to the outer reality and inner reality. Develop the body as a tool of heightened perception. Delve into the paradoxical experiences that emerge in acknowledging this state of reality. Allow these experiences to reframe/describe the nature of reality. Find ways to express these in art.

4. **Experience:** *Rasa* (aesthetic flavor or aesthetic essence), Rest, Bliss, Sympathetic Aesthete

In traditional Indian worldviews, there is an integral vision of the world and an understanding of its balance based on complementary concepts of inner and outer, finite and infinite interwoven through a coded language of metaphor, into an organically interrelated and multilayered system of concepts (Vatsyayan 1997, 162-163). This leads to an integral multiplicity of expression, ideating, and visual forms. This process of unraveling creativity through paradox and integral multiplicity leads to experience at multiple levels of being, both in the artist and the aesthete. In the Indian model, the artist is also an aesthete, having drawn from first hand aesthetic experiences of the universe. Therefore the artist (*kalākār*) is also the sympathetic aesthete (*sahṛdaya*). In Indian aesthetics, *sahṛdaya* refers to someone who is able to resonate with the heart of another person/being and therefore intuitively grasp emotions felt by the other

person/being. In this way, the artist is able to evoke the most unified and peak aesthetic experience (*rasa*) from within their heart. This fullness of experience enables the artist to reside in a state of mindful equilibrium (*hrdayaviśrānti*) and transitory yet deep states of oneness and bliss experienced with all forms of life (*ānanda*). These three concepts of aesthetic essence, equilibrium, and bliss indicate the core of a transformative aesthetic experience. When an artist becomes a sympathetic aesthete of the natural world, they are able to experience a sense of oneness with the natural world.

Actions: Be aware of emotional states, their transience, their heightening, and their flavours to draw out the richness of experience. In order to be aware of emotional states, develop the quality of *hrdayaviśrānti*, a state of restfulness from which to observe emotions. As an artist, cultivate resonance with the natural world as a *sahṛdaya*, a sympathetic aesthete. In these quieter states, you might come upon a resounding joy of bliss.

5. **Transcendence:** Transformation/Shift in Consciousness

When the artist touches a state of inner quietude through relishing the essence of creativity, there is a moment of complete oneness with one life. Transitory, albeit powerful, it allows for transformation and deeper shifts in consciousness. Oftentimes, love and compassion are a natural flow in this state of being.

Actions: *Vimarśa* (Self-reflection). Tacit or expressed in creative work, be aware of momentary transitions that lead to transformations in consciousness. Allow the being to be flooded with inexplicable joy. Remove all internal obstructions. Observe the arising of compassion as a state of being. Reside in resonance with all life in this state. Stay in this state as meaningful actions emerge.

Conclusion

Contemplative self-awareness remains at the heart of the Indian method for observing the essence of life as well as oneself. I am already bound by the ethics of the cosmic order of harmony (*ṛta*) in my perception. *Aesthetic essence (rasa)* and *self-reflection (vimarśa)* lend me the threads for my practice.¹¹

¹¹ These three Sanskrit words are representative of complex conceptual categories in Indian aesthetics and philosophy. All three of them are associated with ideas and interpretations of consciousness. *ṛta* is considered to be the essence and foundation of Indian philosophical traditions. It is a dynamic and fundamental principle that sustains, governs, and runs the universe. *Rasa* is the foundation of Indian aesthetic theories and it frames the poet/artist, their creative intuition and ability to be inspired by the deeper essence of everything around them, the work of art, and the *sahṛdaya* (aesthete) in a single continuum. The *sahṛdaya* is one who is in complete resonance with the heart of the artist. Aesthetic appreciation in *rasa* theory has non-duality (or the principle of *advaita*) at its core. *Vimarśa* is consciousness reflecting on itself with discernment of a deeper meaning associated with this word, and this interpretation of the word draws from conceptual categories in *Kāśmīr Śaivism*.

What do I owe these birds, I wonder in my furtive missions to uncover their outlandish/eccentric joy of being. I am just muddling around, hoping to find lines for my art. But somewhere near me, out there in marshes that get turned to urban skyscrapers, lakes turned to plastic ditches, oceans swimming with debris, there are birds wading, swimming, feeding, giving birth, rearing young, and of all the indignity that we perpetrate on life in all its forms, this indeed is the most heartbreaking. In that sorrow I find lines that soar with the birds and yet they are bound by the heaviness of human mindlessness.

Why should this be the quest and concern of the artist's line? Are there any objective or direct answers to this subjective inquiry? Is it possible to research these traversing and nuanced emotions that defy disciplinary boundaries and lend themselves to curious observations of birds? The artist searches for years to discover that line. That line is discovered not just by observing the bird, but going through these emotional layers: not through skill alone, but in a moment of exuberance or stillness that the birds share with her. A preening bird, a darting bird, a swimming bird – they are all aware of your presence. A bird that you watch through your binoculars too seems to be aware of your inquisitive inquiry into their personal lives. The owls I have noticed have a sharp opinion about these intrusions and sometimes tacit permissions are required for the birds to accept your presence in their midst. The owls of course can be most condescending if you do not meet their high standards of negotiated agreements. That line that I find after all these negotiations is not just skill, but conversation, it is my friendship with life; it is the way I honour the birds, but more than that, it is the way I discover myself in relationship. Through that line I become bird – swooping, turning, gliding, landing – in gentle strength and that inexplicable stillness that guides flight. I for one am curious about the relationship between form and consciousness and in that I choose to use the artist's line to inquire, research, comprehend, investigate, reach out, and be bird wing, tail, feather, beak, body, and the partnering sky-winds.

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