

A PSALM OF LIFE; A WESTERN ECHO OF THE EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Eastern philosophy seeks to understand the purpose of life, the nature of the soul, and the path to spiritual liberation, harmony, and the search for ultimate truth rather than giving purely rational or material explanations of life. It refers to the philosophical traditions that developed mainly in Asia, particularly in India, China, and Japan. Having similarities with the Chinese and Japanese on spiritual and ethical values, harmony between humans and nature, inner self-realization and enlightenment, the Indian philosophy is deeply connected with religion and spirituality. Schools such as Vedanta, Yoga, and Buddhism explore the relationship between the self and ultimate reality. Major sources include texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Vedas. Here in the current paper we will throw light on the Shreemad Bhagwat Gita to understand one western piece of literature 'A Psalm of Life' written by American romantic poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dealing with concepts like dharma (duty), karma (action), moksha (liberation), and the immortality of the soul.

Key words ---- life, soul, goal, fate, God, time

Introduction

The Srimad Bhagavad Gita has profoundly influenced the western literature and philosophy since its first English translation in 1785 by British Orientalist and East India Company official Charles Wilkins, titled Bhagvat-Gita or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon. It shaped the works of Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, influenced modernists such as T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley, fireside poets like HW Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant and European poets like William Blake, offering themes of detachment, duty, and spiritual unity.

Finding resonance in the Gita's focus on the soul (atman) and its unity with the cosmic whole, incorporating these ideas into their philosophy of self-reliance and nature, the transdentalists also showed their rebellion against orthodox unitarianism, offering concepts of divine inner light and non-attachment. Similarly T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and The Dry Salvages reflect the Gita's themes of spiritual struggle, detachment, and the continuity of time. William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were also impacted, with Coleridge reportedly finding an "indelible mark" in the text. Authors like Aldous Huxley identified the Gita as a key text of "Perennial Philosophy," promoting it as a universal guide to wisdom. Hermann Hesse's spiritual exploration also drew from Indian philosophy, including the Gita. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb", famously quoted the Gita, specifically the verse "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds"

कालोऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत्प्रवृद्धो
लोकान्समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः |
ऋतेऽपि त्वां न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे
येऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ||11. 32||

"The Supreme Lord said: I am mighty Time, the source of destruction that comes forth to annihilate the worlds. Even without your participation, the warriors arrayed in the opposing army shall cease to exist." it is well explained by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 'This form of the supreme lord is the

all devouring giant, and here Krishna presents Himself in the form of all devouring time[1]. This illustrates the profound, sometimes haunting, impact of its ethical dilemmas on Western thought regarding duty and destruction.

There would be no dearth of examples how the Gita introduced Eastern spiritual concepts into Western literature, influencing poets, novelists, and thinkers to explore the deeper, often neglected, spiritual dimensions of human existence. And this paper would be discussing one life transforming poem 'A Psalm of Life' with reference to the Shreemad Bhagwat Gita.

Stanza wise analysis

H. W. Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" and the Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā share a remarkable moral and spiritual kinship, though they arise from very different cultural and religious contexts. We will have an analytical study comparing the two, focusing on philosophical ideas, tone, and vision of life and action. "A Psalm of Life" (1838), one of the finest examples of moral idealism in Western literature, written in the aftermath of personal sorrow, just after the death of his first wife Mary S porter, is a didactic poem that calls for a life of active purpose and moral courage. As Newton Arvin (1963) rightly points out Longfellow's poetry being overly sentimental and moralizing [2]. Similarly according to Upadhyaya (1998), the Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā, a sacred Hindu scripture of 2nd century BCE, a part of the Mahābhārata, is a narrative framework of Lord Krishna's philosophical guidance to the warrior Arjun in the righteous war [3]. This focuses on the spiritual meaning of action, duty, detachment and the eternal nature of the soul. Though separated by time, geography, and faith, both works converge in their affirmation of dynamic living and selfless action, both advocate self-reliant, purposeful action.

Despite their cultural and temporal differences, both texts uphold a philosophy of action, urging mankind to live meaningfully, perform duties selflessly, and face life's challenges with faith and strength. Both texts promote moral idealism; Longfellow calls for faith, patience, and perseverance. Krishna calls for equanimity, devotion, and duty without ego. Let's analyze the text stanza wise with respect to different verses of the Gita.

Relinquishment of pessimism

At the outset of the poem,

**Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!—
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem,**

We notice an imperative mood featuring a call to action, or command, for the pessimistic people or may be for the orthodox psalmists who perform compositions under any rigid and conventional religious beliefs. The poet relinquishes all the negative songs of the pessimistic people or may be giving staunch remarks to the psalmists who composed the psalms of the Bible in a rigid reflection of "depressed condition" where the speaker feels overcome by "never-ending waves of sorrow" expressing the Injustice of the world that life is an empty dream, soul is dead, things are not what they seem etc. The poet here tries to create a sense of urgency about life, rejecting the tendency of the worst aspects. Similarly lord Krishna rejects the fear, impotence and idleness of Arjun and preaches him active striving by quoting

**क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते |
क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्त्वोत्तिष्ठ परन्तप || 2.3||**

Lord says, 'Parth, it does not befit you to yield to this unmanliness. Give up such petty weakness of heart and arise, O vanquisher of enemies!' And hence Krishna as a true counselor suggests how successfully treading the path of enlightenment requires high spirits and morale. One needs to be optimistic, enthusiastic, and energetic to overcome the negativities of the material mind, such as sloth, the rut of habit, ignorance, and attachment. 'Tell me not' and 'क्लैब्यं मा स्म गम' both being in the same negative imperative mood evoke the sense of true responsibility in the minds of hopelessness and despair. The same thing quoted by Swami Vivekananda (1998) in 'Thoughts on the Gita' that in the world there is neither sin nor misery, neither disease nor grief; if there is anything in the world which can be called sin, it is this — 'fear', the weakness or the faintheartedness [4].

Mortal body vs Immortal soul

As we move forward to the second stanza, Longfellow's concept of earthly immortality through good deeds aligns symbolically with the Gītā's spiritual immortality of the soul. As it says,

Life is real! Life is earnest!

**And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.**

Longfellow's call—"Life is real! Life is earnest!"—is a powerful protest against fatalism and passive resignation. He insists that life is not a dream but a field for action where every moment must be lived with purpose and resolve. Thus distinguishing between body and soul emphasizing death is inevitable but not the end. The composition of the mortal body by five elements such as earth, air, fire, water and space is way different from the immortal and eternal soul, which is timeless and indestructible. In a similar tone we find lord explaining

**न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचित्
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ 2.20॥**

Which means 'the soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed'. Existence in the womb, birth, growth, procreation, diminution, and death are transformations of the body, not of the self. What we call as death is merely the destruction of the body, but the immortal self remains unaffected by all bodily changes. It's a glance that Longfellow's poem can be viewed as a Western echo of the Gītā's timeless spiritual message regarding attitude towards life and death.

Again showing the eternity of the soul God explains via the verse

**नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः ।
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः ॥**

Which tells the soul can never be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor can he be burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind. All kinds of weapons, swords, flames, rains, tornadoes, etc., are unable to kill the spirit soul. Nor was it ever possible to cut the individual souls from the original Soul. No one however, can describe how the individual soul evolved. Because they are atomic individual souls eternally, they are prone to

be covered by the illusory energy, but they are timeless. Only the material body is succumbed to death not the never-ending soul. The writer means the same saying the line; 'And the grave is not its goal'.

Stage of steady intelligence

As we proceed to the third stanza,

**Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.**

Longfellow is telling us that the purpose of human life is not merely to seek pleasure (enjoyment) and not to drown in sadness (sorrow). Life is not meant to be wasted in either extreme. Instead, the true aim of life is action — meaningful, purposeful work. We should live in such a way that each new day brings improvement, progress, or growth compared to the previous day. The same tone resonates when God explains in

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः |
वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ||2. 56||

'One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a sage of steady wisdom.' Further in the next lines,

यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम् |
नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ||2. 57||

'One who remains unattached under all conditions, and is neither delighted by good fortune nor dejected by unpleasant situations, he is a sage with perfect knowledge.' An enlightened person does not allow the mind to harbor the material frailties of lust, anger, greed, envy, etc. Only then can the mind steadily contemplate on transcendence and be fixed in the divine. If one permits the mind to brood over miseries, then the contemplation on the divine ceases and the mind is dragged down from the transcendental level. Similarly, if the mind craves external pleasures, it runs to the objects of enjoyment, and is again diverted from divine contemplation. So a sage of steady wisdom is one who does not allow the mind to hanker for pleasure or lament for miseries. Further, such a sage does not permit the mind to succumb to the urges of fear and anger. In this way, the mind becomes situated on the transcendental level.

In another verse therefore the lord suggests Arjun to accept and tolerate everything comes in our life, as everything is non-permanent.

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥

O son of Kuntī, the nonpermanent appearance of happiness and distress, and their disappearance in due course, are like the appearance and disappearance of winter and summer seasons. They arise from sense perception, O scion of Bharata, and one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed.

Further, Rudyard Kipling, the famous British poet, has encapsulated the essence of this verse on Sthita prajña (Stage of steady intelligence) in his famous poem "If." (1910)

'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same...
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

If all men count with you, but none too much:
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!"

The poem 'If' advocates the same stoic philosophy of life: to remain calm under pressure, endure suffering without bitterness, accept both success and failure with equanimity, and persist in action even when exhausted. Kipling defines maturity not in terms of success, wealth, or power, but in terms of inner discipline, emotional balance, courage, humility, and moral integrity.

By calling "Triumph" and "Disaster" "two impostors", Kipling undercuts the finality of both success and failure, reinforcing the idea that neither should define one's worth. This balanced worldview gives the poem a timeless, almost aphoristic quality resembling the idea of steady wisdom.

Non-permanence of life

As we look over the fourth stanza,

**Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
 And our hearts, though stout and brave,
 Still, like muffled drums, are beating
 Funeral marches to the grave.**

"Art" here means human achievements, knowledge, and the work we create, where Longfellow says that such meaningful work lasts a long time, often longer than a human life. And Time passes very quickly. Life is short; we cannot afford to waste it. Even if we are courageous and strong, our hearts continue to beat without stopping. Longfellow compares the heartbeat to the slow, soft beating of drums in a funeral procession. In the words of God,

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।
 तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥2.27॥

Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable. Anybody who has taken birth will surely meet with death one day. At every moment we are dying. Shree Krishna explains in this verse that life is inescapably a dead end, and so a wise person does not lament over the inevitable. This means that with every heartbeat, we are gradually moving toward death. It is a reminder that life is temporary and precious, so we must use our time wisely, act with purpose, and leave behind something valuable.

Life with dignity

Correspondingly in the fifth stanza,
**In the world's broad field of battle,
 In the bivouac of Life,
 Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
 Be a hero in the strife!**

Longfellow compares the world to a vast battlefield, full of challenges, struggles, and duties, and life is like a bivouac, a temporary camp used by soldiers, uncertain, and full of movement. We stay in one place only for a short time before moving to the next phase. So we should not live passively, should not allow ourselves to be pushed or controlled by circumstances or by others, should not live without purpose or direction, like animals that simply follow the herd. Rather we should face life boldly and courageously. As Avinsh Agarwal rightly

says, 'we all fight our own battles everyday in the battlefield of life. More often than not we are plagued with guilt, doubt, fear and filled with conflict' [5]. Longfellow encourages us to fight our struggles with strength and determination, live with purpose, dignity, and moral courage. That reverberates in the God's words as follows

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा-
न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही।।2.22॥

Just as a person removes old clothes and wears new clothes, the soul leaves a worn-out, old body at death and takes on a new body through rebirth. The body is temporary, like clothes. The soul is eternal and merely changes bodies. Death is not an end, but a transition. Birth and death are just changing garments, not losing identity and hence the life is a temporary camp. In another verse The lord mentions

हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् |
तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतनिश्चयः || 2.37||

If you fight, you will either be slain on the battlefield and go to the celestial abodes, or you will gain victory and enjoy the kingdom on earth. Therefore arise with determination, O son of Kunti, and be prepared to fight. The two inescapable phrases 'Yudhaya ktruta nischaya' and 'be a hero in the strife' resemble in the sense to have an unwavering decision to fight with strong determination rising above every kind of emotional hesitation.

Importance of present time

In the sixth stanza

**Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!**

Here the poet suggests not depending blindly on the future, even if it looks bright. The future is uncertain, and we cannot rely on what has not yet come. And not to cling to the past—its mistakes, failures, or sorrows because whatever has happened is gone; and it should not disturb our present. The only time we truly have is the present moment. As the poet emphasizes 'Trust no Future, Let the dead Past bury its dead', becomes even more comprehensive in the verse

अशोच्यानन्वशोचस्त्वं प्रज्ञावादांश्च भाषसे |
गतासूनगतासूंश्च नानुशोचन्ति पण्डिताः ||2. 11||

Krishna tells Arjuna, 'Do not grieve over what has already happened. The wise do not lament for the past. Life is ever-changing; No possible reason justifies lamentation. The Pundits—those who are wise—never lament, neither for the living nor for the dead. Hence the grief you visualize in killing your relatives, the prediction you do about future is all illusory.' Just like Longfellow says, 'Leave the past behind; it cannot be changed. According to the Vedic Wisdom, 'wisdom flows to a man who meditates, acts and lives according to the eternal laws of nature'[6].

Further lord Krishna tells;

नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः ।

शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्धयेदकर्मणः ॥ 3.8 ॥

Which means, 'Perform your prescribed duty, for doing so is better than not working. One cannot even maintain one's physical body without work.' Krishna emphasizes to take action now, as the present moment is the field of karma. Longfellow's call "Act in the living Present!" is pure Karma Yoga.

Again "Heart within, and God o'erhead" resonates with the Gita in the verse

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽर्जुन तिष्ठति ।

भ्रामयन्सर्वभूतानि यन्त्रारूढानि मायया ॥18.61 ॥

The Supreme Lord is situated in everyone's heart and is directing the wanderings of all living entities, who are seated as on a machine, made of the material energy. So we must perform our duty now, with clarity and determination. So we need to work with sincerity, courage, and inner strength and trust that God is watching and guiding from above. The writer means offering your every activity to God and feeling intense separation if ever one loses remembrance of Him.

यत्करोषि यदश्रासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।

यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥9. 27॥

Lord Krishna suggests whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation to the sacred fire, whatever you bestow as a gift, and whatever austerities you perform, do them as an offering to Me. That sets the seal on the idea of the writer of heart within and god overhead.

Follow pursuits

In the seventh stanza

Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime,

And, departing, leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time;

Longfellow says that when we look at the lives of great people—leaders, thinkers, saints, heroes—their achievements inspire us. Their lives show that we too can rise above ordinary living and make our lives noble, meaningful, and spiritually elevated. And when one day we leave this world, we can also leave behind our "footprints on the sands of time"—that means good actions, noble deeds, inspiring examples Impact on others. These footprints are symbols of the influence we leave for future generations to follow. This idea is similar to the Bhagavad Gita's teaching in karma yoga,

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ 3.21 ॥

Which means whatever action is performed by a great man, common men follow in his footsteps. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues. Lord Krishna explains the principle of Karma Yoga in this verse. He says that the conduct and behavior of a great person in society is a model for the common people. When a great and respected person adopts any action or conduct, the people of the society naturally try to follow the same path. Thus, an efficient and ideal personality shows the right direction to the society and people adopt it by seeing his conduct. This verse also teaches us that we should be conscious of our conduct and actions, because our actions affect the society. If we work with honesty, patience and dedication, then positive change can be possible in the society. This principle of Karma Yoga inspires us to set a positive example through our actions and become an inspiration for the society. Here the writer emphasizes on the noble

footprints laid by the great people for the common people to cross the ocean of life. This idea is rejuvenated in the following stanza,

**Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.**

Here Longfellow says that the good deeds and noble examples we leave behind—our footprints—can guide someone else who is struggling through life. “Life’s solemn main” means the vast, deep ocean of life full of difficulties. A “forlorn and shipwrecked brother” is a person who has lost hope, feels broken, and is suffering. When such a person sees the “footprints” of those who lived bravely and nobly, he will regain courage—“take heart again.” The Gita repeatedly assures that even if someone slips, fails, or feels “shipwrecked,” they can rise again if they follow the path of righteousness shown by others. So Longfellow’s “forlorn and shipwrecked brother” is similar to the discouraged Arjuna or anyone who loses hope. Longfellow’s footprints are exactly like Krishna’s teaching. Great actions become guiding paths for others who are confused or lost. Our good life inspire someone else to rise again from hopelessness.

Effort without attachment

Now let's move to the ninth and last stanza which reads,

**Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.**

This stanza is a very important teaching about self-discipline and self-control to elevate or uplift oneself by one’s own effort, self-responsibility and inner strength. Which resonates with the verse of the Shreemad Bhagwat Gita;

**उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् |
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ||6.5||**

Which means a person should lift oneself (Let us, then, be up and doing), by one’s own self and should not degrade oneself. Because the mind itself can be our best friend or our worst enemy, one should not allow oneself to fall into misery, weakness, or degradation. Since our growth or downfall largely depends on our own thoughts, discipline, and actions. If the mind is controlled, positive, and disciplined, it helps us progress. If the mind is undisciplined, negative, or weak, it destroys our peace and success. In the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, Krishna teaches that self-mastery is essential for spiritual and personal growth. The idea that personal responsibility for spiritual growth, can be either a powerful ally or a hindrance, leading to constant endeavor is reflected by the line 'Still achieving, still pursuing,' in the short span of life. Again 'learn to labour and to wait' this message perfectly matches Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥2.47॥

'You have control only over action, not over its future results. Do not act only for the sake of the results. Do not become attached to inaction.' Krishna explains that humans can control their actions but not always the results. Results depend on many factors—time, circumstances, and divine will. Therefore, one should perform duties sincerely without anxiety about success or failure. Shree Krishna continues to expound on the topic of working without attachment to the fruits of actions, and states that the wise endowed with equanimity of intellect, abandon attachment to the fruits of actions, which bind one to the cycle of life and death. By working in such consciousness, they attain the state beyond all suffering in the following verse.

कर्मजं बुद्धियुक्ता हि फलं त्यक्त्वा मनीषिणः।
जन्मबन्धविनिर्मुक्ताः पदं गच्छन्त्यनामयम् ॥2.51॥

The paradox of life is that we strive for happiness, but reap misery; we crave love, but we meet with disappointment; we covet life, but know we are moving toward death at every moment. Every human being engages in fruitive works to get happiness, but finds no satisfaction. This blind pursuit has been going on for many lifetimes and yet there is no sight of happiness. Now, if people could realize that nobody has ever achieved happiness by engaging in fruitive works, they would then understand that the direction in which they are running is futile, and they would think of doing a U-turn toward spiritual life. Those whose intellects have become steadfast with spiritual knowledge understand that God is the Supreme Enjoyer of everything; they renounce attachment to the fruits of their actions. As Dr. Padhy writes in her poem 'Faith',

Awake my soul! Weed out the grass,
Of falsehood, desire and faithlessness.
The meadow is meant for paradise growth,
Don't vindicate ways of God to youth [7].

Conclusion

Hence it is conspicuous about the common philosophy of both the texts on basis of the fact that life is meaningful and purposeful, one should perform one's duty with courage and determination and human action guided by faith and moral responsibility leads to a noble life showing primarily importance of action, rejection of fatalism, moral responsibility and inspiring others through virtuous actions. According to Tapasyananda (1990), every soul is potentially divine and the goal of life is to manifest this Divine by controlling the Nature, external and internal [8]. The philosophies and ideologies lied in the essence of the Bhagwat Gita are introspected in shaping the western ethical and moral frameworks. The principles of effort without attachment, relinquishment of pessimism, follow pursuit of noble deeds, significance of present time, state of steady intelligence, non-permanence of life, living with dignity are all intrinsic to eastern traditions, which have sparked renewed interest in ethical theories in the west and specifically in the short lyrics 'A Psalm of Life'.

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Author's Bionote



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