

Compassion in Practice: Perspectives of Bhutanese Primary Science Teachers

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Abstract

Compassion is increasingly recognised as essential for creating safe and inclusive learning environments. In Bhutan, where compassion is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual values, there is a growing need to strengthen teachers' capacity to integrate compassionate practices. This study explores how primary science teachers enact compassion in their classrooms and provides practical models to inform teacher professional development. Using a sequential mixed methods approach, the study surveyed 201 primary science teachers in Bhutan and conducted in-depth interviews with ten teachers. The survey provided an overview of compassionate practices, while interviews offered deeper insights into how these practices are enacted. Six key strategies emerged: role modelling compassion, practising self-compassion, using compassionate speech, listening empathetically, understanding students' life stories, and establishing caring classroom rules. Data show teachers create emotionally safe classrooms and foster positive relationships, with mindful compassion through presence, non-judgment, and intention central to building trust and connectedness in Bhutanese classrooms. The findings highlight that compassionate teaching is practical and can be developed through reflective practice, mindfulness, peer learning, and professional support. These insights can guide teacher training, mentorship, and reflective tools to integrate compassion and mindfulness as core pedagogical skills.

Keywords

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Introduction

Compassion, defined as the awareness of suffering of others coupled with a desire to alleviate it (Goetz et al., 2010), is increasingly acknowledged as a

cornerstone of effective education. In educational contexts, compassion has been associated with nurturing safe, inclusive, and supportive environments where students feel valued and respected (Jazaieri, 2018). In Bhutan, a nation profoundly influenced by Buddhist principles and the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), compassion is not merely a personal virtue, but a cultural imperative embedded in societal values (Ura et al., 2012).

The Bhutanese education system, guided by GNH principles, emphasises holistic development, where emotional well-being and ethical values are as critical as academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 2014). Nevertheless, and despite this cultural foundation, there remains a gap in understanding how compassion is practically enacted in classrooms, particularly in subjects like primary science, where cognitive demands often overshadow affective dimensions. This study addresses this gap by exploring the enactment of compassion among Bhutanese primary science teachers. Drawing from a broader research project on compassionate pedagogy, this paper focuses on the research question: How do primary science teachers in Bhutan enact compassion in the classroom?

The investigation is timely, as global education discourse increasingly highlights the role of compassion in fostering resilient, inclusive learning environments amid challenges like student mental health crises and post-pandemic recovery. In Bhutan, teachers are traditionally revered as role models embodying cultural values. Informed by Jazaieri's (2018) work on compassion, understanding how such practices manifest in classrooms can inform teacher training and policy, ultimately improving student learning outcomes.

The objectives of this paper are threefold: (1) to identify specific strategies used by Bhutanese primary science teachers to enact compassion; (2) to examine how these strategies align with quantitative survey data on compassionate practices; and (3) to discuss implications for teacher development and educational policy. By integrating mixed methods data, this paper portrays nuanced practices of compassionate teaching that bridge cultural traditions with contemporary pedagogical needs.

Literature Review

The concept of compassion in education has roots in both Eastern philosophies and Western psychological frameworks. In Buddhist traditions, prevalent in Bhutan, compassion involves recognising suffering and acting to relieve it, often intertwined with mindfulness and empathy (Dalai Lama, 2002). This aligns with

Western definitions, such as those by Neff (2003), who describes compassion as comprising self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. In educational contexts, compassion extends beyond empathy to include actionable responses that support student well-being (Jazaieri, 2018).

The literature on compassion in education highlights its role in creating positive teacher-student relationships, enhancing student engagement, and fostering holistic well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Compassionate pedagogy is closely linked with mindfulness, which encourages present-moment awareness, non-judgment, and intentionality (Hanh, 1993; Jinpa, 2015). Compassionate teaching enhances student engagement, reduces behavioural issues, and improves academic performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Key strategies to enact compassionate teaching and that are identified in the literature include role modelling (Drukpa, 2021), self-compassion as a foundation for outward compassion (Neff & Germer, 2017), compassionate communication (Hanh, 2009), empathetic listening (Garrison, 2010), understanding students' backgrounds (Franzes, 2017), and co-creating classroom norms (Worline & Dutton, 2022).

Role modelling compassionate behaviour has been emphasised as particularly influential in educational settings. Teachers who model compassion create emotionally safe spaces, fostering trust and belonging (Wilson, 2013). Jazaieri (2018) argues that teachers who demonstrate compassion inspire students to adopt similar practices. Self-compassion has also emerged as a prerequisite for compassionate teaching. According to Neff (2003), self-compassion involves self-kindness, recognition of shared humanity, and mindfulness. Teachers who practise self-compassion are better able to regulate emotions, avoid burnout, and extend compassion to others (McConnell, 2015).

Compassionate communication, both speech and listening, has been highlighted in the literature as central to building trust and reducing conflict (Bowman 2010; Hart & Hodson, 2004; Lhamo, 2018; Wynn et al., 2022). Buddhist traditions, influential in Bhutan, emphasise right speech and mindful listening as essential for reducing suffering (Shantideva, 2006).

Empathy, or the ability to understand students' perspectives and life stories, contributes to a deeper connection between teachers and learners (Franzes, 2017). Empathic teaching promotes positive learning outcomes—such as higher academic achievement and lower classroom aggression—by facilitating supportive teacher-student interactions that enhance engagement and motivation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zhang, 2022).

Finally, research emphasises the importance of collaborative classroom management practices. Involving students in developing classroom rules fosters ownership, respect, and accountability (Johannes, 2005; Worline & Dutton, 2022). In Bhutan, pedagogical reforms such as the transformative pedagogy programme have sought to shift classroom practices from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches (Dorji et al., 2020; Tshering et al., 2022). However, empirical investigations into specific enactment strategies in science classrooms are limited. Science education, often perceived as objective and fact-based, benefits from compassionate integration to address student anxieties and promote inquiry-based learning. This study builds on these foundations by providing data-driven insights from Bhutanese contexts, contributing to global discourse on compassionate pedagogy.

Methodology

This research employed a sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2011), prioritising quantitative data collection followed by qualitative exploration to provide depth and triangulation. The approach allowed for a broad overview of compassionate practices via surveys, enriched by in-depth interviews. Participants included 201 primary science teachers from diverse Bhutanese schools (urban and rural), selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness.

The survey instrument was developed based on Rasch analysis constructs (e.g., Origin of Compassion, Compassionate Relationships), comprised Likert-scale items measuring self-reported compassionate behaviours.

Reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages). Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively selected teachers (5 male, 5 female; balanced urban/rural) to explore enactment strategies. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Manual thematic analysis was employed following the six-step guide approach described in Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) and the University of New England. Participants' anonymity was maintained, and informed consent was secured. Integration of data occurred at the data analysis and interpretation stage, where survey results corroborated qualitative themes, enhancing the trustworthiness of findings.

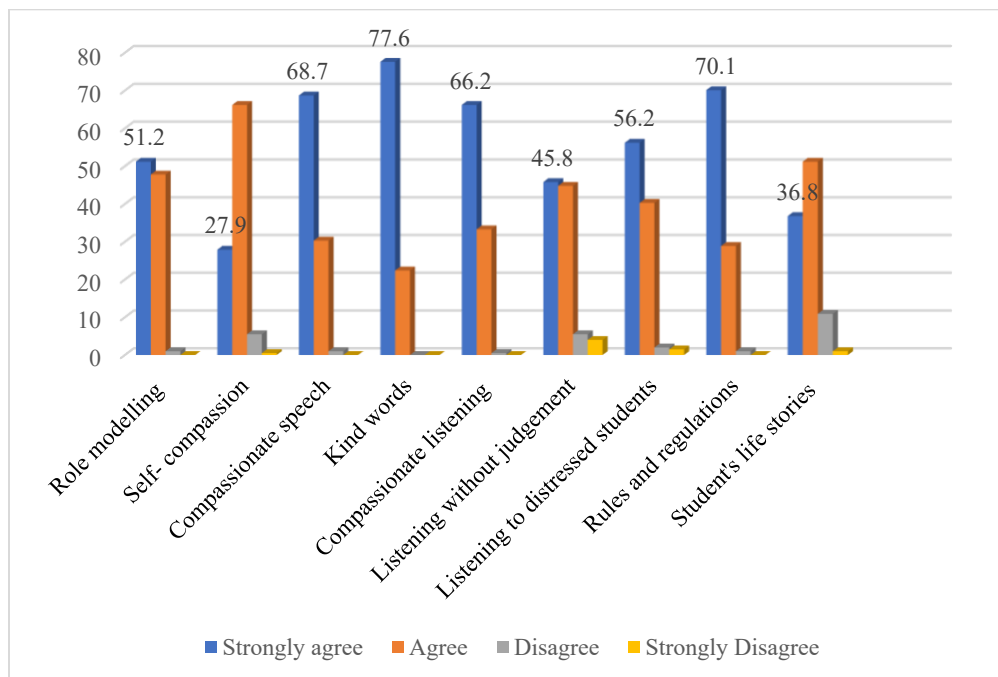
Findings

Interview themes were inductively derived through thematic analysis, revealing six key strategies for enacting compassion: role modelling compassionate behaviour, practising self-compassion, using compassionate speech, engaging in compassionate listening, getting to know students' life stories (empathy), and establishing classroom rules rooted in care and respect.

These strategies emerged consistently from the qualitative data and were corroborated by survey responses, demonstrating high alignment (e.g., over 88% agreement across relevant items). Figure 1 illustrates the enactment of compassion, integrating the qualitative themes with corresponding survey data percentages. The figure highlights the distribution of responses for key survey statements, highlighting the prevalence of these practices among participants.

Figure 1

Enactment of Compassion by the Bhutanese Primary Science Teachers in the Classroom



To provide a structured overview, Table 1 presents the survey items that were used to corroborate findings via qualitative analysis.

Table 1

Survey Items aligned to Compassionate Enactment Strategies (n=201)

Theme/ Strategy	Subtheme	Survey Item
Role Modelling		I teach compassion to my students by modelling compassion for them.
Self-Compassion		I have a strong practice of self-compassion.
	Speaking with compassion	Speaking with compassion helps me connect with the students.
Compassionate Speech	Kind Words	I use kind words like please, thank you, you are welcome, etc., and actions to encourage and support the students.
	Listening with compassion	Listening with compassion encourages students to share their views and opinions.
Compassionate Listening	Listening without Judgement	I listen attentively without judgement when students speak to me.
	Listening to Distressed Students	I take time to listen to students who are distressed.
Classroom Rules		Classroom discipline improves when students are involved in developing rules that foster respect, caring and community in the classroom.
Student's Life Stories		I like to know my students and their life stories.

The following subsections detail each strategy, weaving in qualitative excerpts from interviews to illustrate lived experiences, alongside quantitative insights for triangulation.

Role modelling compassionate practices

Interview data unanimously (n=10) positioned role modelling as a foundational strategy, where teachers consciously demonstrate compassionate behaviours to inspire emulation among students. Participants described entering classrooms with warmth, inclusivity, and forgiveness for errors, viewing themselves as exemplars in Bhutan's culturally reverent teacher-student dynamic. For example, M6U explained that, *"a compassionate teacher should be a role model to the students, very kind and understanding, loving and caring. If the teacher is compassionate, then the students will follow the teacher, and they will gradually become compassionate students."* M5R further elaborated on practical actions:

I enter the classroom with a smile on my face. I do not become very strict with the rules and regulations in the classroom. I greet the children and ask the children how they are doing and then just free share. When I give activities to them, I include them all. I never neglect them. I give constant support to my

children. Even if they make mistakes, I do not [become] strict about their mistakes because it is the habit of human beings to make mistakes.

Another teacher (F1U) added a nuanced perspective that focused on fostering respect:

...firstly, I try to make my students understand that they have to respect each other. [...] I try to make them realise that it is ok to make mistakes and respect the point of view of others. I always make sure to reinforce and appreciate their work.

Survey data reinforced these findings, with 99% agreement (51.2% strongly agree, 47.8% agree) on modelling compassion as a teaching method. Disagreement was negligible (1%), suggesting near-universal endorsement. This high consensus indicates role modelling is not sporadic but a deliberate, pervasive practice, potentially amplified by Bhutan's emphasis on teachers as cultural role models.

Practising self-compassion

Seven interviewees identified self-compassion as a prerequisite, enabling teachers to extend compassion outward without burnout. This inward focus involved self-kindness during challenges, positivity, and honest self-reflection: “*Firstly, to be compassionate (to students), we should have compassion in ourselves*” (M2R). Another teacher linked it to emotional regulation, arguing, “*if I am not happy, I cannot make others happy*” (F4U). Furthermore, another teacher clarified the role of positivity within self-compassion:

If I am very negative, get angry, I don't think I will be able to show compassion to students. The first thing is that you have to be positive to yourself about the work you do, about yourself, about your experience and all. I think that is important. You have to care about yourself. Then only you will be able to show it to others. (F2R)

In addition, one teacher described how tolerance of chaos contributes to self-compassion:

At the time, there used to be chaos in the class. So many problems. At that time, we get distressed. Still, then we do not show that in the class. We know that if the teacher is distressed in the class and if the students know that the teacher is distressed, then learning won't be taking smoothly in the class. (M6U)

Lastly, in discussing aspects of self-compassion, one teacher highlighted truthfulness, explaining:

Being a teacher, we also have to know that we are human beings. We make mistakes. If we are teaching in the class and if that students ask some questions

and we are unable to answer their questions. Instead of giving them the wrong information, we can tell them, 'I don't know. I will ask for help from other teachers and let you know in the next class'. Here we are being truthful to ourselves. We are being compassionate to ourselves. (F1U)

Quantitatively, 94.1% agreed (27.9% strongly, 66.2% agree) with the item “I have a strong practice of self-compassion” (Table 1), with only 6% disagreement. This suggests self-compassion is a robust, underappreciated pillar that can shape pedagogical responses within the classroom.

Using compassionate speech

All interviewees stressed mindful, kind language to build connections and avoid harm, viewing speech as a tool for inspiration or destruction. F1U reflected:

I have never used such words (unpleasant words). I always try to think twice before using any words. Even if I am angry, I do not use such types of words as 'you idiot' or something. Because we know that such words can affect us...

Another teacher noted analytical mindfulness:

Compassion helps in a great way. We can see many people getting problems on a daily basis. Even if they speak one word, they do not analyse themselves because they do not have the compassion to analyse what they are speaking, what they are thinking and what they are talking about... Whether the word that they have spoken will hurt them or not. (M5R)

Survey results showed overwhelming support for these findings, with 99% agreeing (68.7% strongly, 30.3% agree) that compassionate speech aids connection, and 100% agreeing (77.6% strongly, 22.4% agree) on using kind words (Table 1). Zero disagreement on the latter item highlights its universality in this study context, a possible attribution to the dominant Buddhist influences on communication practices.

Engaging in compassionate listening

All participating teachers (n=10) described non-judgmental, attentive listening to encourage sharing and alleviate distress. One teacher said, “*We should listen to students' problems. When we give time and listen to their problems, we let them share their problems. I feel like when they share their problems, it makes them suffer less*” (M2R). Another teacher detailed how he provides support:

I used to give more time to those kinds [who looked disturbed] of students. So we go outside after the class, and we share some questions. I feel that kind of student is physically and mentally abused by parents and relatives at home. (M1R)

In relation to listening, M6U noted reduced judgment as a strategy, *“If we do not have compassion, I have seen that they [we] are judgmental, but after having compassion, we don’t become judgmental to our children, and we understand their prospect behind our children.”* Similarly, F3R emphasised emotional attentiveness: *When you attentively listen to your students, you have emotions there. You listen to the students with all your emotions with interest and then you listen to them. When you listen to them, then I would feel like you get to know more about the particular child.*

Survey data corroborate these findings: 99.5% agreed (66.2% strongly, 33.3% agree) on encouraging sharing; 96.5% (56.2% strongly, 40.3% agree) on listening to distressed students; and 90.6% (44.8% strongly, 45.8% agree) on non-judgmental listening (Table 1). Higher disagreement (9.5%) on judgment-free listening may indicate contextual challenges in busy classrooms.

Establishing classroom rules rooted in care and respect

All interviewees (n=10) advocated co-creating rules for compassion, empowerment, and discipline. F4U listed examples: *“Taking care of each other, helping each other. Do not take daily activities as competition, rather everybody should come together. [The students] should help one another when they do group work.”* Another teacher added, *“Respect others’ views in the classroom. We should always carry a smile on our faces. We should support and give guidance when our friends are having some problems”* (M2R). F3R described how she carries out such a process:

When we develop classroom rules, I do not write all the rules and paste them on the wall. I go to the class and discuss with the students and let them talk, bringing up the rules from their side so that the students do not feel that it is the teacher who is imposing the rules, but students take ownership of their own.

In commenting on how classroom rules can promote compassion, M3R argued that it is via promoting ownership and respect, *“Since [rules] come from all the students, it helps in the classroom discipline... Respecting their views and involving them involves compassion.”*

Survey data support these findings: 99% agreed (70.1% strongly, 28.9% agree) on improved discipline via student-involved rules (Table 1), with only 1% disagreement. These findings collectively depict compassion as enacted through mindful, relational strategies, with qualitative narratives revealing practical considerations to such enactment.

Getting to know students' life stories (empathy)

Empathy was enacted through understanding students' backgrounds, with most interviewees (n=8) sharing employing methods like conversations and writings. For example, M1R said, *"I used to listen to their [students'] stories wholeheartedly with compassion by responding, letting the students develop eagerness, and by responding by giving full attention to them."* Similarly, F1U recounted, *"Some [students] share problems through letters, or through drawings and through essays and through stories... [one student] was talking about his mother and father fighting every time and him being disturbed and not being able to concentrate in the class."*

Additionally, M5R stressed the importance of compassionate teachers having a holistic knowledge of their kids, *"As a teacher, we have to know about students as well as their life stories... family background, their interests, hobbies and all the capabilities, problems, and family background."*

Survey data reveal this strategy to have the least degree of agreement in comparison to other strategies, 88% agreed (36.8% strongly, 51.2% agree) on knowing students' stories (Table 1).

Discussion and Implication

The findings from this mixed-methods study illuminate the multifaceted ways in which Bhutanese primary science teachers enact compassion in their classrooms, revealing a pedagogy deeply intertwined with cultural, spiritual, and educational imperatives. In this section, we interpret these strategies in light of existing literature, highlighting their intersections with Bhutanese values and global educational research.

The unanimous endorsement of role modelling from our participants accentuates its centrality in Bhutanese classrooms, where teachers are culturally positioned as exemplars of values like compassion (Jazaieri, 2018). Interviewees described modelling behaviours such as inclusive activities, embracing mistakes, and respectful interactions, which align with Drukpa's (2021) assertion that compassionate acts are influential when demonstrated visibly. In Bhutan, this practice resonates with Buddhist principles, where compassion is cultivated through emulation (Gilbert, 2015). This finding extends prior Bhutanese studies, such as Sherab et al.'s (2016), which noted teachers' promotion of Gross National Happiness (GNH) values through modelling, and Jazaieri's (2018), which highlighted teachers' role in embodying cultural traditions. In science education, where inquiry can evoke anxiety, such modelling fosters emotional safety, potentially enhancing engagement.

Self-compassion also emerged as a prerequisite strategy for outward compassion, with interviewees stressing its role in emotional regulation. Teachers reported practising self-kindness during distress, aligning with Neff and Germer

(2017), who describe self-compassion as involving self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. All these elements are echoed in Buddhist views that compassion extends to all beings, including oneself (Dalai Lama, 2002). Participants noted self-compassion aids tolerance in chaotic classrooms and truthful self-reflection, supporting McConnell's (2015) claim that it builds resources for compassionate care. The finding corroborates with that of Jinpa (2015), who argues that self-compassion develops internal reserves for giving to others, suggesting implications for teacher well-being programmes amid global educator stress.

Compassionate speech was portrayed as mindful language that inspires rather than harms, consistent with Hanh's (1993) view that mindful speaking can bring about happiness. Participants reported avoiding derogatory terms, analysing words' impact, as one interviewee noted the lifelong effects of hurtful language. This practice aligns with Bowman's (2010) emphasis on acute word choice in conflict resolution and Hart and Hodson's (2004) advocacy for non-confrontational language in compassionate classrooms. Rooted in Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path, specifically, "right speech" for promoting healing (Huxter, 2015; Shantideva, 2006), this strategy reflects Bhutanese values shaped by empathy and interdependence. Lhamo (2018) similarly found that mindful speech strengthens student relationships, implying potential for reducing psychological barriers in science learning, where precise communication is key.

High survey agreement on being non-judgemental, attentive listening highlights its role in alleviating student distress and encouraging openness. Interviewees described emotional attentiveness and post-class support, echoing Garrison's (2010) framework of compassionate listening as hospitable to pain, suspending judgements for acceptance. Hanh (2011) noted it reduces suffering, while Hoffman et al. (2008) emphasise accepting convictions without personal reaction. This caring approach aligns with Sherab and Dorji's (2013) findings on teachers' supportive nature for effective learning. Lhamo (2018) corroborates suspended judgment fostering respectful exchanges.

The overwhelming survey agreement on student-involved rules improving discipline reflects a shift to collaborative, empowering practices. Teachers co-created norms like mutual respect and cooperation, viewing this as compassionate ownership. Worline and Dutton (2022) advocate designing opportunities for respectful interactions, while Johannes (2005) links democratic rulemaking to self-discipline and emancipation. This finding indicates pedagogical evolution from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches, likely influenced by the transformative pedagogy programme (Dorji et al., 2020; Tshering et al., 2022).

Lastly, survey agreement on knowing students' stories emphasises the role of empathy in understanding behaviours and providing tailored support. Teachers used conversations, letters, and essays to uncover family issues affecting learning, aligning with Franzese's (2017) view that empathy discerns student needs, reaching

those “at the margins.” Wynn et al. (2022) link empathy to communicative connections, while Lhamo (2018) notes deep listening fosters compassion. This practice helps address disruptive behaviours compassionately, supporting Jennings and Greenberg (2009) on reduced violence and improved performance. This finding echoes Zhang’s (2022) on empathy boosting engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study offers a comprehensive model of how Bhutanese primary science teachers enact compassion, synthesising survey data from 201 participants and interviews with 10 teachers. Six interconnected strategies were identified: role modelling, self-compassion, compassionate speech, compassionate listening, empathy through life stories, and co-created rules. Teachers consciously model behaviours to inspire compassion, while self-compassion equips them to manage distress. Compassionate speech and listening foster healing connections rooted in Buddhist mindfulness. Collaborative rules empower students and strengthen community, while empathy through stories enables tailored support. These enactments shift classroom dynamics, aligning with Bhutan’s GNH philosophy and signalling positive pedagogical change through initiatives like transformative pedagogy.

The convergence of data highlights compassion’s consistency across contexts, warranting recognition as a core skill in teacher education. Findings can guide the inclusion of compassion and mindfulness modules in pre- and in-service training, framing the six strategies as pedagogical tools rather than dispositions. Compassionate practice is both practical and achievable, fostered through reflective practice, mindfulness-based self-awareness, peer learning, and sustained professional support. These insights can inform the design of training modules, mentorship, and reflective tools, embedding compassion and mindfulness as core pedagogical skills rather than personal traits. Broader implications position compassion as a domain of teachers’ professional knowledge. School leadership could foster compassionate cultures by embedding empathy in evaluations and rewarding supportive practices. At the policy level, integrating compassion into GNH curricula would institutionalise its role and address gaps in science education reform. Ultimately, a systemic approach to compassionate teaching can empower educators and nurture flourishing communities where students and teachers thrive within the school and beyond.

Further research, particularly classroom observations, would provide deeper insights and validate impacts. While the current research was limited by reliance on self-reports, future longitudinal and classroom-based studies could assess long-term effects on student wellbeing and achievement across subjects and regions.

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