

# Study on Conceptual Precision and the Limited Applicability of "Truth", "Theory" and "Practice" to Indian Philosophical Traditions\*

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**Abstract**—The paper treats some conceptual problems of adequate translation of the Indian traditional philosophical texts. A certain deficiency of Western philosophical background which is rather often case among the translators of these texts into European languages sometimes results in terminological vagueness and semantic misinterpretation of the most crucial concepts of the Indian thought. It is rigorously demonstrated that the Buddha did not intend to proclaim any “noble truths” but that his task was to explain the chief characteristics of the human reality and appropriate attitudes towards them. Further, no exact correspondences of the fundamental Western notions of theory and practice are to be found in India. Instead of them, a tripartite scheme consisting of philosophical vision, regulation of behavior and cultivation of mental states is used.

**Keywords**—*concept; translation; theory; practice; philosophy; truth; Buddhism; Yoga; darshana*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It seems only natural and harmless to apply concepts and terms which are generally accepted, say self-evident in Western culture while translating and interpreting the intellectual legacy of such a highly developed civilization as Indian. Still, this naive approach cannot be free of vexing misrepresentations and biases. Below, we exemplify this jeopardy by demonstrating very limited adequacy of such technical terms as “truth”, “theory” and “practice” if they are used in considerations of philosophical and/or religious Indian traditions, which have yoga as their indispensable constituent.

## II. BUDDHIST SANSKRIT SATYA (PALI SACCA) IS NOT TO BE RENDERED BY “TRUTH”

Scholars belonging to Anglo-German School of buddhology coined the misleading rendering of this Indian word used in Buddhist Tripiṭaka texts by English “truth” as early as in XIX century. The “Pali Text Society’s Pali-

English Dictionary” provides us with a plain and naive lexicographical translation of sacca as “real, true”. In English, “true” and “truth” as strict terms both mean primarily either a statement (“He does not tell us the truth about the event”) or a bit metaphorically a mental state (E.g. “He knows the truth about the event, but keeps silence”) but not the event referred to, which deserves to be designated “real”. It is only true that meanings “true” and “real” are often confounded in a casual conversation, in ancient India as well as modern English. Yet, sacca is not only an everyday colloquial word. It is actually one of the crucial terms of the Buddha’s teachings. If the Buddha were not interested in or capable to distinguish #1 events in the outer world from #2 verbal statements and #3 mental states, he would not have been an influential teacher characterized by a notable originality of his message. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that “satya / sacca” as a technical Buddhist term is used in Pali texts somewhat specifically. Maybe as in English “true”: #1 being excluded whereas #2 and partly #3 are used, sometimes without distinction. This Western semantic option is not necessary, however; other possibilities are conceivable as well.

The most famous early Buddhist context with satya / sacca is the Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta (Sutta- piṭaka, SN 56:11 [1]. “Setting the wheel of Dharma in motion”, sometimes referred to as “Vārāṇasi sermon”). In this discourse, as students of religion or of the Indian philosophy are told, the Buddha once proclaimed “the four noble truths”, namely those of the suffering, its origin, its cessation and the noble path. Curiously enough, among quite a number of English (as well as other Western) translations there is until now not a single one to be admitted as both conceptually and textually faultless.

First, let us peruse some key sentences of the translations performed by Buddhist monks of either Western or traditional Buddhist origin and background.

(1) Bhikkhu Bodhi and (2) Thanissaro Bhikkhu (both are Americans with English as their mother tongue).

(1) “This [first – AP] noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood. <...> This [second -AP] noble truth of the

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origin of suffering is to be abandoned <...> [third-AP] to be realized <...> [fourth-AP] to be developed”. [2]

(2) “This [first-AP] noble truth of stress is to be comprehended. <...> This [second-AP] noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned <...>”. [3]

(3) Ñānamoli thera (an Englishman): “This suffering, as a [first-AP] noble truth, can be diagnosed. <...> This origin of suffering, as a [second -AP] noble truth, can be abandoned <...> [third-AP] can be verified <...> [fourth-AP] can be developed”. [4]

(4) Piyadassi thera (a Sinhalese monk): “This [first -AP] suffering, as a noble truth, should be fully realized <...> This Origin of Suffering as a [second-AP] noble truth should be eradicated can be verified <...> [fourth-AP] can be developed”. [5]

The as far as the translations of the Pali term *pari ñeeya* are concerned (this word designates an attitude recommended by the Buddha towards the first *sacca*), the synonymous equivalents “to be realized, comprehended, understood, diagnosed” are acceptable and seem to conform to the Western concept of truth. Indeed, truth is something to be comprehended, as an apple to be eaten. But further in the contexts of the second and subsequent *saccas* the translation of this word as “truth” proves to be extremely odd. Actually, any and every truth, i.e. a true statement, is admittedly intended *only* to be grasped, understood, comprehended &c and is not supposed to be used differently. In particular, it cannot be either abandoned or developed. The learned authors of these translations display insensitivity to the discrepancy nay absurdity of the expressions “abandoned *or* developed truth”. An object apt to be abandoned or developed is not a truth. Maybe it is a real thing, a mental quality or a personal habit. So the translators manifest nothing other than a confessional idiosyncrasy no less incompatible with the general use of the term as the Christian one (cp. John 14.6 “I am the way, and the truth”). Such translations presumably are to be read mainly by Buddhist and would be Buddhists and cannot be considered as reliable for other purposes.

On the other hand, the professional scholars of buddhology are to an extent sensitive to the incongruity inherent to the quoted confessional translations. But while searching a way out of the conceptual impasse they are prone to unjustified emendations of the Indian source.

(5) An “official” translation of the Pali Text Society runs as follows. “This [first-AP] Arian truth about Ill is to be understood <...> This [second, but “truth” is omitted! – AP] arising of Ill is to be put away”. The translator felt obliged to add a footnote: “We must omit *ariyasaccaṃ* otherwise the text would mean “the Arian truth about the arising of Ill is to be put away (*pahātabbamaṃ*)”. Craving has to be put away”. [6] Likewise he omits *ariyasaccaṃ* in the similar wordings of the *saccas* III and IV. He interprets the invariable presence of this term in the Pali text as a distortion due to ancient Buddhist editors’ predilection to syntactic symmetry.

(6) An eminent Vietnamese Buddhist master Th ệch Nh ậth Hạnh didn’t find any better way out than an arbitrary

emendation, namely deletion of the term *ariyasacca*, from the Pali primary source, just as it had been done before by the British scholar.

“When I realized that the Noble Truth of suffering needs to be understood, <...>. When I realized that the Noble Truth of suffering has been understood, <...>. When I realized the Noble Truth of the causes of suffering<...>. When I realized that the causes of suffering need to be given up, <...>”. [7]

(7) I myself once succumbed to the hypnosis of this universally adopted erroneous equivalent and translated these sentences into Russian more or less in a sense “The Arian truth proclaims: “This is the origin of the burden”” &c despite of the absence of the verb in the Pali text[8].

To summarize, all translators committed one and the same initial error. Their uncritical acceptance of “truth” as a correct equivalent of *satya* inevitably resulted either in conceptually absurd translations or in a textually unjustified editing of the Pali source. The Buddhist technical term *satya* denotes neither a characteristic #3 of a mental state nor #2 of a meaningful statement but exclusively #1, viz. something real or reality. It is something a truth can be told about, not the truth itself. This explanation conforms both to the grammatical and the conceptual levels of the text. We need only to mention a simple linguistic fact. The English abstract word “reality” is not always readily countable, so both “the four realities” as well as “four aspects (facets &c) of reality” are adequate English equivalents of the Pali “*cattāri ariyasaccāni*”<sup>1</sup>. It is only reasonable that every aspect of the reality deserves a special attitude and treatment. So, instead of “this noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned” or “this arising of Ill is to be put away” we obtain an intelligible and exact translation “this aspect of reality, namely origin of suffering, is to be abandoned” = Pali “*dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pahātabbamaṃ*”. Similarly, “this aspect of reality, namely the path, is to be cultivated”.

If we consider a plausible and non-personal factor that contributed to the discussed fallacy, we believe it to be a typically Western preconception, which can be reconstructed as follows. Buddha is reputed to discover profound truth about the human existence, he is expected to present a new worldview, new sense of life. Many texts traditionally attributed to him in the Sutta-piṭaka display consistency, are highly elaborate and even intellectually sophisticated. Therefore, if a scholar and reader with Western background does not see in him a religious teacher (the Anglo-German school of Pali and Buddhist studies was rather reluctant in this respect and was characterized by their stress upon psychological aspects of the Buddhism), he interprets Buddha’s role as that of a theoretician, a philosopher. Along with other features, a theory is a well-ordered set of true statements. In his first speech, the Buddha presented an outline of his theory, the famous four crucial items. So, they must be four truths!

The intellectual bias thus described is deeply rooted in the very core of our Western cultural legacy. The universally

<sup>1</sup> Ariya as ‘noble’ is also objectionable but will not be discussed here.

recognized ancient perfect example of the intellectual perfection of the West is Euclid's "Elements" containing a complete geometrical theory with specific units called theorems. The typical Western philosophical systems are also essays of a total theory of the universe.

But the Indian intellectual legacy is based on an alternative initial intuition, not a theoretical one. It is that of a program. The most ancient Indian texts, viz. the Vedas are traditionally considered to be primarily ritual programs (= set of injunctions, vidhi). The Indian counterpart of Euclid's classical work is Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī which is not a theory, not a linguistic description of the Sanskrit but a program which processes morphemes and produces correct Sanskrit expressions as its output. Similarly, the Buddha did not present to his audience any theory of the human existence. He proposed a program comprising four main guidelines the ultimate aim of which is self-transformation, becoming like the Buddha. While coherently expounding his program, he at first briefly described the object fields (e.g. the suffering; its origin, its cessation and the path) and then indicated the appropriate attitude towards each of them. This body of knowledge is systematic, intelligible, consistent, realizable but contains no theoretical true (neither false) statements.

### III. A DARŚANA IS NOT A PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OR DOCTRINE

Well, reputedly, it is. Therefore the onus probandi of this assertion belongs to me, its author.

First, the simplest plausible way to substantiate this statement is the following. The aforementioned (cp. 1. (1) - (4)) translators are well-educated Buddhist monks with mastery of the Pali language. The Buddhist tradition they belong to comprises inter alia a specific darśana, which is according to etymology in any case a philosophical vision or perspective. It seems highly improbable that they are not experts in this darshana. Still, they committed a serious fault in their understanding and rendering the most crucial issues of the theory or doctrine. Such an intellectual discomfiture would be absolutely impossible in any case of a genuine theory, for instance, in a domain of linguistics or economics. So, a darśana is not a theory or doctrine. Presumably, somebody's darśana is no more than an integral part of a doctrine adopted.

This line of reasoning cannot be ultimately convincing, however, because of the inherent contingency. It could be objected e.g. that the Buddhist tradition involved is actually in decline. We need further elaboration of the argument.

Second, it was already noticed the aspects of a #3 mental state and #2 verbal statements are often merged together. Moreover, they are no less intimately united in the Western notion of a theory.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a theory is a "Systematically organized knowledge applicable in a relatively wide variety of circumstances, especially a system of assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedure devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behavior

of a specified set of phenomena" [8] and such a knowledge comprises numerous ordered true statements. For every theoretician, the sense of any of these statements is content of one of his mental states (to be more exact, a νόημα) characterized by specific valid cognition. It could not be otherwise, because a theory is, in accordance with its Greek origin, a developed kind of λόγος. This remarkably complex notion refers to a specific cultural reality, invented and elaborated in ancient Greece and inherited by the West (and not by India) [9]. As we are told by the dictionary, the λόγος combines the following meanings: "inward debate of the soul; thinking, reasoning; reflection, deliberation; explanation, thesis; proposition; verbal expression, statement of a theory" [10] &c. Besides, this inseparable association of #3 a mental state and #2 its verbal expression is required from an individual in order to belong earnestly to a Christian denomination. A personal faith does not suffice without a credo.

A theory, as a consistent set of meaningful statements, is characterized by (a) a specific field of objects and (b) corresponding practice(s) within it, e.g. an economical theory and an appropriate governmental practice of balanced regulation and laissez-faire or a solid state theory in physics and the practical engineering of chips. The conceptual couple "theory versus practice" is one of the cornerstones of the Western rationality. But this pair which is too familiar in Western culture is totally alien for almost every Indian intellectual tradition (darshana) with a possible exception of the Nyāya school of logic. Instead, a philosophical darśana usually demonstrates a built-in tripartite division of a peculiar kind.

The Buddhist tradition provides us with a transparent example. The eightfold path is divided into three sections. #1 adhiprajñā-śikṣā, "educational training of comprehension" consists of the right view and the right resolve. #2 adhiśīla-śikṣā "educational training of custom-behavior" comprises right speech, right action and right livelihood. Finally, #3 adhicitta-śikṣā "educational training of mental states" is being explained as right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Evidently only #1 refers here to a darśana as mental vision or perspective. A mental vision is certainly one of the two necessary parts of a theory, its expression being the complement. But an act of understanding as "perceiving" or "seeing" a darśana is not necessarily presupposed by Indian authors to comprise a verbal expression as such to say nothing about any standard and privileged one, which on the contrary is surely always the case with a theory of a Western kind. A doctrinal or philosophic darśana is not obligatory discursive but is rather intuitive as is the most literal darśana viz. visual perception; or to say it in simple language, a clear understanding does not necessarily require a verbal expression or even a subject's ability to express. In three Buddhist traditions, namely in Chinese and Japanese Chan (Zen) and in Tibetan Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, the sheer ineffability of their respective darshanas is expressly pointed out.

Not infrequently some important aspects or facets of a darśana are no less aptly expressed by poetical images without any "theoretical" concepts whatsoever. Two im-

<sup>2</sup> Only the strictest sense of the word is meant.

pressive examples are readily found in Sāṅkhya tradition. (a) The fundamental ontological dualism of two main tattvas, the opposition of a passive puruṣa as pure consciousness (m.) and of the active prakṛti as the material cause of the world, is not illustrated but elucidated by a scene in which a rāja (puruṣa) passively enjoys an actress's (prakṛti) enthralling dance being performed to please him. This image when properly understood tells us more about both ontology and the final goal of this school than dry scholastic explanations. (b) The Sāṅkhya conception of three guṇas (layers or aspects of every being) can be excellently introduced by an image of homogenous milk (prakṛti as a state of complete undistinguished balance of guṇas) which turns sour by itself and is self-transformed into the upper white layer of the clabber (sattva), the lower and darker whey layer (tamas) by an emerging inner force (rajas). These similes provide us vision and comprehension but not a theory.

To conclude, a specific darśana of an intellectual tradition<sup>3</sup> is not a counterpart of the Western theory but corresponds to no more than one half of it, namely intuitive. Let us now consider the issue of a possible Indian equivalent of its Western complement, viz. practice. The lexicographical explication of this word stresses or presupposes that an essential feature of a "practice"<sup>4</sup> is its observability, the character of being a positive behavior of any kind.

But darśana as the first aspect of tripartite Indian division of a tradition is distinguished not from the undifferentiated Western "practice", but from two no less mutually different aspects #2 and #3. The second one encompasses corporal and verbal activities that are subsumed under behavior as the observable side of an individual's presence in the world. Despite of this important similarity, it cannot be said to be practice due to considerations of logical consistency. As a matter of fact, it is only a partial complement of #1, darśana, and the darśana itself it not a theory. Nor a non-existing unity of #2 and #3 can be practice because of its very non-existence. The #3 is very often referred to as "practice" by the Westerners who have adopted one of such Indian intellectual and spiritual traditions as a variety of the Buddhism, the Pātañjala Yoga, the Advaita Vedānta &c. They call themselves "practitioners". This word usage is acceptable only as a colloquial one. Its nearest Western correspondences are the expressions like "a practicing Catholic". Still, their adequacy remains rather limited. The Catholic doctrine is modeled as a specific theory. Therefore, it can be put into individual practice, but within the Catholicism there is no need to distinguish between #2 i.e.

<sup>3</sup> The habitual non-discrimination of the notions of a darśana and that of 'Indian intellectual tradition' by the Western scholars is a deplorable fact.

<sup>4</sup> Practice n. 1. A habitual or customary action or way of doing something: makes a practice of being punctual. 2. a. Repeated performance of an activity in order to learn or perfect a skill: Practice will make you a good musician. c. The condition of being skilled through repeated exercise: out of practice. 3. The act or process of doing something; performance or action: a theory that is difficult to put into practice. 4. Exercise of an occupation or a profession: the practice of law. 5. The business of a professional person: an obstetrician with her own practice. 6. A habitual or customary action or act. [8]

regular confessions, pious behavior &c and #3 e.g. silent prayer or more advanced monastic techniques. On the contrary, this discrimination is indispensable and crucial in any aforementioned Indian tradition. In Pātañjala Yoga, for example, #2 is described and prescribed as 5 yamas or observances (not to harm anybody, to keep celibacy and so on) and 5 niyamas or restraints (to study yoga literature, to exercise oneself in asceticism and so on). The #3 is the triple procedure of fixation, meditation and absorption, in total called samyama. It is the yoga as such according to the Yoga Sutra, that is, by definition the sphere of "management and control of one's own mental states" (yogaś citta-vṛtti-*nirodhaḥ* Y.S.I 2.) The methods belonging to #3 are in all non-tantric traditions characterized by insurmountable inaccessibility for external evidence. Any non-instrumental observation of a yogi who is presumably engaged either in a "practice" of samyama according to Pātañjala school or a Buddhist śamatha-vipaśyanā meditation "practice" will end with an inevitably uniform result, viz. a simple and uninformative ascertaining that the person is sitting relaxed and motionless with (half)closed eyes and is breathing quietly. This is nothing else than suspended behavior, therefore, no behavior at all. Maybe he is meditating, maybe napping. Nobody knows.

The domains #2 and #3 find their exact correspondence in the Buddhist notion of two (not four) satyas as realities, the provisional or conventional (samvṛti) and the ultimate (paramārtha).<sup>5</sup> The #2 contains regulations and prescriptions concerning the conventional. They aim to minimize everyday problems and impediments that can hinder #3, the pursuit of mental self-cultivation. The aim of the latter is to obtain and maintain an experience of the ultimate. So these aspects are utterly different and are not to be subsumed under Western "practice".

To summarize, the discussed conceptual triad is specific for traditional Indian scholarship and has no correspondence in Western tradition of thought.

#### IV. TWO POSSIBLE KINDS OF RELATION BETWEEN #1 AND #3

It seems instructive to discuss this theme in brief in order to distinguish this relation from that of Western theory versus practice.

The influence of #1 upon #3 is uniform and doesn't require any further consideration. It is simply restrictive and prescriptive programming of behavior in accordance with the view. But the interrelation #1 versus #3 does need some elaboration. It is either that of pre-experience anticipation as well as post factum description of experience that delimitates and directs the adept's efforts, or a technical training prescription aiming to produce a definite result.

The First Variety Will Be Exemplified by the Interpretation of Dhyāna ("Meditation" or "Contemplation") in Buddhism and in Pātañjala Yoga. The object of two slightly different descriptions, viz., the reality of dhyāna,

<sup>5</sup> As well as in Advaita Vedānta, although the terms are different.

obviously coincides. The Buddhists and the Pātañjala yogis performed very similar practices (the only minor difference consists in their choice of concrete object-support to enter into meditative state) and achieved the same states of consciousness.

In the YS the mental absorption (samādhi) with consciousness (samprajñātaḥ), which is synonymous with dhyāna, is described as accompanied on the first level by an initial inclination towards the subject-theme (vitarka), its continuous elaboration (vicāra), bliss (ānanda) and a self-sense (asmitā) which subsequently merge one into another on the upper levels according to the cited order. E.g. both vitarka and vicāra are no more present on the third level<sup>6</sup>. The Buddhist much more detailed account as found in Sāmaññaphala-sutta (DN II) [12], similar canonical passages and later commentaries thereupon correspond to it almost completely except three details. First, in the Buddhist description, the second level, namely that without vitarka, with vicāra only, is not distinctly separated from the previous and subsequent levels and is sometimes called “intermediate” level. Certainly, the Buddhist yogis did experience this state but were not especially interested in staying on it. They preferred to ascend on the following level I’m not ready to explain why. Second, instead of ānanda in the YS, the synonymous prīti is used. Such varieties of expression were often used in India as a school’s brand. But the third discrepancy represents an essential difference of the respective darśanas. According to Buddhist account, the dhyāna state is accompanied by pleasant physical sensation (sukha) up to the fourth level whereas the YSBhāṣya mentions asmitā “self-sense” instead. As is obviously impossible to experience any sensation while any self-sense is lacking, the yogis of both traditions did experience pleasant sensation accompanied with “self-sense”. The Buddhists, however, avoid mentioning the latter in order not to reinforce the illusion of “self” (ātman, attā) which is to be eradicated. The yoga darśana, on the contrary, recognizes this “self” called the observer (draṣṭṛ) and puruṣa. On the uppermost dhyāna level there is no more selfconsciousness according to both traditions. The mythological permanent denizens of this level of dhyāna are called by the Buddhists asaññasattā “sentient beings without consciousness”. It is evidently presupposed that on the lower levels a sense of the self persists.

So, both descriptions are a bit incomplete and partial. They are not purely technical, but had been adjusted to a darśana.

The second variety will be illustrated by Buddhist and Pātañjala instructions concerning cultivation of four “limitless good attitudes” (Sanskrit apramānya. The generic term occurs only in Buddhist texts but the list of the four is identical with YS.) These are loving kindness (maitrī), compassion (karuṇā) sympathetic joy (muditā) and

<sup>6</sup> Here is the full context. Vitarkavicārānandāsmītarūpānugamāt samprajñātaḥ || YS 1.17 || vitarkaś cittasyāḷambane sthūla ābhogaḥ. sūkṣmo vicārah. ānando hlādaḥ. ekātmikā samvid asmitā. tatra prathamāś catuṣṭayānugataḥ samādhiḥ savitarkaḥ. dvitīyo vitarkavikalāḥ savicārah. tṛtīyo vicāravikalāḥ sānandaḥ. caturthas tadvikalā 'smitāmātra itī. ||YSBh. 1.17 || [11]

equanimity or indifference (upekṣā). The yoga darśana prescribes this fourfold emotional training as applied to other sentient beings” happiness, sufferings, virtuous actions and sinful actions, respectively<sup>7</sup>. This sounds very consistent. Every sentient being essentially commits acts and experiences pleasure and pain which results in four yogi’s attitudes. But the Buddhist detailed instruction [13] prescribes this training in a substantially other way. The reader is told to cultivate both loving kindness and equanimity towards sentient beings as such with the difference that the first is potentially active while the latter passive and takes into consideration the law of karma. The explication of the compassion, however, is the same as in yoga darśana. Finally, the sympathetic joy is to experience towards others” prosperity and happiness and not virtuous behavior as in YS. It is easily seen that ontological status of the objects of loving kindness and equanimity (viz., a sentient being) is essentially different from that of compassion and joy (a condition of a sentient being). It may seem that the Buddhist methods were inconsistent. But this would be a hasty and erroneous conclusion. The Buddhist darśana affords to sentient beings only a status of conventional reality. A Buddhist yogi is advised to train some intentional states of his consciousness during meditation, but not to act or behave. All objects of his meditation belong to conventional reality. The same is to be said about the meditation of a Pātañjala yogi because both actions and experiences are according to his darśana confined to this provisory layer of reality, the ultimate one being the state of final liberation.

Different darśanas predetermine different techniques.

## V. CONCLUSION

The disregard of the conceptual accuracy while translating Indian philosophical texts results in various distortions, from gross to subtle, of either the sense of the texts or the semantics of the European technical terms and should be avoided.

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<sup>7</sup> Here is the full context. Maitrīkaruṇāmuditopekṣāṇām sukhaduḥkhaḥpunyāpunyaviṣayāṇām bhāvanātaś cittaprasādanam || YS 1.33 || tatra sarvaprāṇiṣu sukhasambhogāpanneṣu maitrīm bhāvayet, duḥkhiṣu karuṇām, punyātmakeṣu, muditām, apunyaśīleṣūpekṣām. ||YSBh. 1.33 || [11]

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