Opening to the Attitude about Experience

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:33

It's really such a privilege to sit in a room with more than a hundred people who are interested in exploring their minds in a deep way. I was just sitting here feeling this gratitude for you and your commitment to the practice, to doing this work, which isn't easy. It's said to be a rare thing, this interest in the Dharma. I really want to express my appreciation for that.

Even just the precepts that we take—if you think about what we're doing there, committing to non-harming through taking these precepts. Even if we just looked at the first precept, refraining from killing, and even just looked at that in terms of refraining from killing other human beings, much less animals and bugs—if everybody on this planet today decided to follow that precept, we would live in a different world. It's not a small thing what you're doing here. We can get myopic at times looking at our own experience and feel like we're maybe just navel-gazing. But what we are doing is so helpful for the world. So thank you for that.

This afternoon in the instruction period, Will mentioned this sense of often looking for the why—that's our tendency when things are going on. We look at why things are happening. He mentioned this particularly around emotions, that we want to know why, we think about the why. How was I conditioned in the past? What was the why of that? And the why, as he said, often gets into the thoughts, thinking, reflecting, problem solving. He pointed instead that what we're doing here is looking more at the what and the how.

We've talked a lot about the what we're experiencing: the six sense doors. All of our experiences at the six sense doors—this is the what of our experience. One way of understanding the how of experience—and there are different perspectives on this—is to have a curiosity about how we are in relationship to what is happening. We've talked about this, about exploring the attitude, the relationship. Another phrase for this would be: how am I in connection with what's happening?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, my teacher, has this phrase: awareness alone is not enough. My understanding of what he means is that just noticing what is obvious—that's a lot of what we're emphasizing. The what of experience is what is obvious. We sit down and we notice what's obvious: body sensations, emotions, moods, sights, sounds. All of the what of experience.

But if we're just noticing what's obvious, we may be missing these hidden perspectives that are so deeply conditioned into our minds. Habits, habitual ways of meeting experience. We could call them hidden views or hidden perspectives that we're so familiar with, so conditioned to meet experience from, that we don't often even notice they're happening. They kind of fly under the radar. We wouldn't necessarily

notice them if all we're noticing is what is obvious.

So it's useful to begin to be curious about how we relate to experience, to begin to recognize these habits and patterns that we carry with us. If we are just noticing what's obvious, these hidden perspectives are operating in the background. They're simple perspectives often, just almost taken for granted. Like when something unpleasant happens, we don't like it and we want to get rid of it. That's just what we do. We don't normally think to recognize, to know, to be aware of the not liking.

So that's what this investigation or curiosity into the how, into the attitude, is exploring: What are these perspectives? And how do they feel, basically? This is useful, and as Sayadaw said, awareness alone is not enough. The hidden perspectives of agendas or habits and patterns of how we usually meet experience—often those patterns and habits have been shaped by greed,

wanting to get what I want, aversion, wanting to get rid of things that I don't like, and confusion or delusion—beliefs, attitudes, beliefs about what should be happening or shouldn't be happening, views and opinions.

If we're not aware of those beliefs, in noticing the what, in noticing what's obvious, we are unwittingly reinforcing those perspectives. If we are observing something—knowing, for instance, an unpleasant experience from the perspective of "this has to go away"—then we are actually cultivating that perspective. If we're not aware of it, if we don't know that it's happening, we're reinforcing that perspective.

One of the famous quotes of the Buddha: "Whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind." And this is intuitive. We know this from experience. If we think about something a lot—or as someone mentioned, if we hear something a lot, if we hear a particular song repeatedly—then that tends to happen. We tend to think about it more. Whatever we put into our minds gets reinforced. We put certain things into our minds consciously and we can see how those things get reinforced. If we think about a particular person frequently, we tend to think about that person even more.

These hidden perspectives, these attitudes that we're not so cognizant of, they get reinforced not because we're aware of them, but because we're acting on them, because we're following them. And most of the reasons why we suffer, why we struggle—they are found in this terrain of these relationships to experience. So looking at this and beginning to uncover these habitual, often hidden perspectives is a direct path. This looking at these hidden agendas, beginning to uncover them, this is also a very direct way to freedom.

One of the definitions of freedom in the Buddhist understanding is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. Greed, aversion, and delusion are understood to be the engines of why we suffer. And these are the baseline motivators of many of our habitual perspectives. So beginning to be curious about these hidden perspectives, we are making a direct line to see the ways that our minds

contribute to our own suffering and contribute to the cycles of reactivity internally and externally.

We've said many times here—I think we've said it at least three times a day, if not more—what is happening, the experience that we are knowing, is not what we're cultivating. It's not about the experience. We are cultivating a way of attending to experience. And so this way of attending to experience includes looking at, or being curious about, what is the perspective that we're bringing to the observing.

Because this is often hidden, it's useful to have a way to begin to invite it to show itself, you could say. Not so much that we're digging for it, but it's more like, "Hey, any attitude there that wants to let me know it's there?"

So just a couple of examples around attitude. I think you basically have the flavor, but I mentioned there are actually four basic flavors of attitude. I've mentioned three of them that are related to greed, aversion, and delusion—those three qualities of mind that underlie the habits and patterns that tend to lead to suffering.

A simple example for each one: If something pleasant is happening, we tend to like it and want more of it. There's a greed, a leaning into it. If something unpleasant is happening, we tend to not like it and want it to go away. We want to fix it, to change it, to problem-solve around it. Those are some flavors that can come in with aversion.

Delusion is a little subtler. It can be obvious in some ways—it can just be a kind of disconnection from experience. But boredom can have a flavor of delusion to it. It's like, "Yeah, that's not important," and we get bored with something.

This is a bit of a tangent, but whatever experience is happening, the Dharma can be seen with it. There's no experience, no matter how seemingly trivial, that does not reveal the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. Whether it's reaching for a door or feeling an emotion, there's no particular experience we have to find in order to see the truths that lead to freedom—the understandings, the insights. So if we're bored and think, "Yeah, this isn't so important," that's delusion. Delusion is at work there.

So that's a form of delusion. And that attitude of "yeah, this isn't important" — it may not be important with respect to some task we have to accomplish at work. The fact that we know we're seeing might not be important in terms of accomplishing a goal we're doing at work. There are different kinds of relative understandings we may have around what's important and what's not important, what's trivial, what's worth our attention. But in our practice, there's nothing that's not worth our attention.

If we find we're bored in our meditation, that's an example of a relationship that involves delusion. There are lots of them. I'm not going to go into that right now, though I sometimes do — I've actually given a nine-part series on delusion. There's a lot to say about it.

These attitudes, these flavors of attitude that are related to greed, aversion, and delusion — when we see those, we're in the terrain of seeing the hindrances. We're seeing the reactivity. In terms of noticing these attitudes, I'll talk more about what happens when we notice the attitude in a moment. For now, I'm just going to describe what the attitudes are.

So we have these three basic kinds of attitudes related to the unwholesome qualities of heart and mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. The fourth flavor of attitude is related to the wholesome qualities of heart and mind. This is a relationship we can have with observing experience that is basically a relationship of ease, of balance, of calm. It's a relationship that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening.

When I said a few moments ago that we can see the Dharma in any experience, this kind of attitude — we could call it wise attitude — is a perspective that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening and to see its nature. We can start to see its impermanent nature. We can start to see its unreliable nature, that it's not reliable as a place for lasting happiness. We start to see that it's not "my" experience — it's an experience, a conditioned arising.

That fourth kind of attitude, wise attitude — we could say right attitude — is a flavor that's actually also useful to notice. Sometimes when we begin to notice our relationships to experience, we can notice this balance of mind. This is useful to recognize. It's in the terrain of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, in the third foundation of mindfulness, which is actually the terrain of what we're talking about here: the attitude of mind, the state, the qualities of the mind. In that sutta, it talks about noticing the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

We're more attuned to noticing the presence of things. It's easier to recognize when something is there. But we can also notice: when greed is not there, what's it like? When aversion is not there, what's it like? When delusion is not there, what's it like? There are many flavors of mind that can be present when those are absent — calm, ease, peace, equanimity. There might be a flavor of love, of compassion, of patience, of joy, delight, contentment. It can be experienced in many different ways.

When greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, it can be very interesting to see what's here. For myself, this was useful because I was so oriented towards noticing greed, aversion, and delusion. It was much harder for me to begin to recognize those wholesome qualities. They were there — I could see, "yeah, no problem." But it was interesting to rest in that place. What does "no problem" feel like? Oh, there's actually joy here. There's peace. There's curiosity here. What do those qualities feel like?

There's a kind of investigation, a curiosity that we can begin to recognize — wise attitude as well. Now, it's not a problem particularly to have unwise attitude, as long as we are recognizing it.

The problem with attitudes connected to greed, aversion, and delusion is when they remain unseen. When they go unrecognized, as I mentioned a few moments ago, they reinforce themselves.

I spent a lot of time doing this, actually, with an aversive quality—or perhaps more accurately, there was a

holding on to observing an unpleasant experience because I had discovered that when I looked at an unpleasant experience, it could go away. The motivation in my mind at a certain point became to make these unpleasant experiences disappear. I was looking at them. It wasn't that I was trying to push them away. In fact, I was holding on to them in order to make them go away.

That attitude contains a little bit of greed: "If I look at this just right, if I really get in there and look at it just right"—that's the greed side. "It will go away"—the aversion side. I spent a lot of time doing that without seeing it clearly, and that reinforced those habits.

So again, when we start to recognize these perspectives that are operating, the very seeing of them is the medicine.

If we can be curious—this checking of attitude or exploration—I think I mentioned on the first day that from time to time we can be curious about what the relationship to experience is. This is a tool we can use in our practice. We mostly spend time noticing what is happening, noticing what's obvious. And from time to time—perhaps every four or five minutes—we can check in: what's the relationship to what's happening?

This begins to get more familiar. As we cultivate this checking in, this curiosity about what the attitude is, it starts to become more natural. At a certain point, it's something we don't have to think about doing. It simply becomes part of how we know experience. But at least for me initially, there needed to be a little bit of conscious checking in—dropping in the question every now and then. What's the attitude? What's the relationship to experience? It can be that simple.

One particularly useful time to do this is whenever there's any kind of suffering. If there's suffering happening right now, if it feels hard to meditate, if there's a struggle going on, there's an attitude in there that hasn't been clearly seen. So if there's any struggle in your practice, it's a great time to ask, "What's the attitude?"

This checking in, this asking of the question—we're not trying to think about it, not trying to figure out what the attitude is. As I said at the beginning, it's more of an invitation. We're dropping in an invitation: is there an attitude available to be seen right now?

The question itself—"What's the attitude?"—is just a dropping in of an invitation to the mind. Think of it like sitting in front of a still pond and dropping a pebble into the water. Ripples will naturally result. You can sit there and watch as the ripples happen. Dropping a thought into the mind while meditating will have ripples. You don't have to do anything more to try to find the answer.

So you can simply drop that question in: What's the attitude? Different language may be more helpful for different people. Sometimes the phrasing "What's the relationship to what's happening?" works well. Or "How am I with what's happening?" It could be that simple. Maybe just, "How am I? How is the mind with what's happening?" Drop that question in and then just keep noticing the obvious.

What is obvious? That question dropped into the mind is going to shift the experience a little bit. And maybe something will show up. Sometimes something shows up really clearly. Like, "I don't like this." It's just blindingly obvious what the attitude is. Sometimes it shows up more as a feeling shift. For instance, it might be that you're noticing some pain in the body. And then you ask, what's the attitude with that pain? And what you become cognizant of, the ripple that you notice, is a feeling of bracing through the whole body. A kind of holding. That's an expression of an attitude, we could say. That bracing is a kind of holding back, a kind of pushing away. So dropping in that question may change the feeling of what's happening, or it may come as an actual thought in the mind.

For myself, when I drop a question into my meditation—and I do use questions, it's kind of an inquiry—I learned this from my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, to use questions from time to time. He taught it very much in this way: you just drop the question in and then you just keep practicing. You see what the result is, what the ripples are.

I've learned that when I get an answer or response through words in the mind, I hold that really lightly. Maybe, maybe not. That's an interesting idea. That's an interesting perspective—perhaps that's what's motivating this. When I get a response in the felt sense of experience, I'm more trusting of that. And this speaks a little bit to what Will said last night, that real connection is not about the conceptual. So when there's a response to that question through concept, I hold it lightly. It's not that I dismiss it, but I also ask: Is there a feeling with that? Does that really resonate? Because we have all kinds of ideas about our relationships to things. And sometimes when we ask that question, what might pop up is the most obvious thing we've thought about—"Of course there's fear in the middle of this," or whatever.

So just explore that dropping in of a question without following thoughts or thinking about it. See what happens as you drop in that question. If you get some kind of sense of a response, then all you need to do is notice that. A lot of times when I talk about working with the attitude, somebody will say, "Well, when I notice an attitude, what do I do with it?" You just notice it. There's nothing more you need to do with it. If you become aware of a perspective that you're looking through, then you've become aware of it. And now it is one other thing in the whole field of what you're noticing that is also being noticed.

An analogy I used the other day involves perspective. We may be looking through blue glasses—blue sunglasses or something. And we may forget. I've forgotten sometimes that I'm wearing my sunglasses and I'm looking for them, and then I realize I've got them on. I've forgotten because I've gotten adjusted to looking through them. So it's not so obvious that they're coloring the world. But then I can notice, "Oh right, they're on my eyes." And then I might be able to recognize there is a blue tinge to the world. We can begin to see that. So that might be one shift that happens as we begin to notice an attitude—we just begin to notice how that perspective is tinging experience. That attitude or perspective of aversion is tinging how we're looking at things.

This perspective—I'm a real connoisseur of aversion, we could say. I have looked at it a lot, and so when I

see it arising in the mind, I can see that it influences. Like I look at a tree and it's like, yeah, I don't like that tree. It affects how we meet experience.

And so seeing a perspective, we can begin to recognize, okay, it's tinging things. We can begin to notice the effect that that has. We also might be able to actually begin to know, yeah, I'm looking through those glasses. We can begin to see—I need to really look through them, but I know they're there. It's almost like the glasses get taken off and you're looking at them rather than through them.

Sometimes that happens as we notice an attitude. It's like that becomes the thing that we're noticing. Rather than the thing that we were having that relationship to, like an unpleasant experience, we're more attuned to the aversion to it. We begin to get curious about the aversion itself.

So in noticing an attitude, there are different levels or layers at which we can be noticing it. But at each of these layers, we can begin to see a little bit of a shift. Even just noticing, yeah, I'm looking through blue glasses, I'm looking through that perspective of aversion—there can be a little bit of an "oh, that's what's happening." We know that. It shifts the whole experience because now we have an attitude of curiosity about the attitude of aversion. We have this bigger kind of field in which we're noticing the attitude of aversion. And maybe it even becomes interesting to be curious about the aversion. It becomes perhaps one of the more predominant things that we're noticing.

We don't have to make that be what happens, but that can happen. That would be like we're looking at the sunglasses. Oh yeah, look at that. I can see that on the other side, it's blue. And where it's up here, it's not blue anymore. We can begin to see something about how that attitude works, begin to see the way that those attitudes influence our experience.

If the mind can shift from looking through the attitude to being with it, to seeing it as an experience, we can feel a shift. There's a shift of understanding, and we know the difference. You've talked about it in your groups—seeing, "Oh, I see what's happening. Yeah, there's an aversion here." And when we see that, it's not like it goes away immediately, but there's more ease in the mind.

This is a really important thing to know: as we start to get curious about looking at these unskillful attitudes, these unwise attitudes, that's what allows us to move in the direction of wise attitude. We get curious about seeing these patterns instead of being driven by them. That shift—instead of looking through it, we're knowing it's there. We can know it's there and be okay. That okay quality is wise attitude.

One of the things Sayadaw U Tejaniya says is that we get to know wise attitude by being really curious about unwise attitude. We don't get to wise attitude by somehow magically transcending our states of mind. We get to know that the meeting of our experience is what helps us learn about how to meet experience.

This reminded me of a phrase that Joseph Goldstein sometimes used. He'd say, we want to understand dukkha—because that's what the First Noble Truth says, we need to understand dukkha—we want to

understand dukkha without experiencing dukkha. And it doesn't work that way. The very understanding of dukkha comes through meeting it. But meeting it with a perspective of curiosity. Meeting it with a perspective of friendliness. That friend that says, "Yeah, you can be here too."

And so this checking the attitude – it's really a simple tool to help us recognize that there's a pattern or habit in the mind that hasn't been clearly seen, one that might not be willing to just show up in terms of what's obvious if we simply keep noticing what's obvious. But as soon as we give it that invitation and it shows up, then it's just something else to know. There's nothing magical or special we do with it. It's just another experience to recognize.

As I said at the beginning, it doesn't matter what we are attending to. We can see the impermanent nature of an attitude also. Actually, some of my most heart-opening understandings have come from seeing the impermanent nature of my really persistent patterns of mind. Self-hatred. Watching self-hatred. Seeing the resistance to it. And seeing in the midst of watching it that it's just a thought being believed. That's what's going on – this thought that's being believed. And the recognition that the mind doesn't have to believe that. It's just a belief this mind made up. That belief was an attitude, a really deep perspective applied to that thought. Right in the midst of seeing self-hatred – freedom. Freedom. It doesn't matter.

I actually thought at the beginning of this retreat, which I now call my self-hatred retreat because I spent a lot of time feeling and experiencing self-hatred – at the beginning of that retreat, I thought, "Well, I guess this is the retreat where I don't get enlightened." I thought I wasn't even going to have any insight. I thought that the self-hatred had to go away before I had any insight. And then I discovered that right in the midst of looking at self-hatred, the mind can understand the impermanent nature of it, the conditioned nature of it. Just seeing: this is what's arising.

So this checking of the attitude helps us to uncover these hidden perspectives. I'm going to talk about a couple of hidden perspectives – these are examples of common attitudes that we carry without recognizing them about meditation itself.

This is an interesting piece about attitude. Often our attitudes are related more directly to the experience of whatever's happening. An unpleasant experience will tend to create an attitude of aversion; a pleasant experience tends to create an attitude of greed. But we can have beliefs – and this is in the realm of delusion – we have beliefs that we don't think of as greed or aversion. We just think of them as true. This is true. And a lot of attitudes about the meditation itself can be this kind of belief.

We may have attitudes that are related to agendas around our meditation. An example that I think many of you probably are familiar with is that you may have the attitude that sleepiness is not a good meditation object. Now, we've talked about this, so maybe you don't have that attitude anymore, but you probably have had that attitude. The idea that I can't be meditating while I'm sleepy. There's a little bit of aversion in that, perhaps, because we feel like the sleepiness is unpleasant sometimes.

But the experience of sleepiness – and this is an interesting thing to notice about how beliefs and attitudes work – the experience of sleepiness is only unpleasant because you have the idea that you shouldn't have it while you're meditating. The experience of sleepiness itself is kind of inherently pleasant. But when it arises during meditation, we have this idea: shouldn't be happening. That idea creates a filter that affects the experience of sleepiness, and we experience it as unpleasant.

But if we let go of that idea that it's a problem to be sleepy while meditating – and as Leanne said, just let yourself fall asleep and see what happens – if you let go of that idea, you'll probably start to notice how pleasant sleepiness is.

So there's a belief or an agenda around meditation about what are good objects and what are bad objects for meditation. There are a lot of these kinds of beliefs in meditation. I had at one point a belief that I had to be in a certain state of mind in order to meditate.

At one point I was practicing in Burma, and I think some of this comes from familiarity with meditation. When we get more familiar with the practice, we get more familiar with certain states of mind, and we associate those with good practice. So then we think, "That's the state I need to be in in order to meditate."

I found myself as I was moving from walking practice to my room to sit, I found myself kind of putting my mind into a state that was a subtle form of repression of thought. Just a little bit of, "Yep, we don't think while we're meditating." But I noticed it doing that. I noticed it trying to create a meditative state. It's like, "Wait, I'm aware. What's wrong with this state? This is a state of mind. I'm knowing this one. Why do I have to change it in order to meditate? There's already meditation happening."

So there was a little belief—that belief that I had to put my mind into a certain state to meditate—that was revealed. And when that was seen, the mind recognized, "Well, there's nothing wrong with this state. I'm aware."

So if you're trying to change the state of your mind and you notice that, have some curiosity about what's going on there. What's the belief? That's an interesting question that can get at something, maybe a question that can help if the question "What's the attitude?" doesn't resonate. Sometimes when we drop in that question we don't get much of a response, and that's okay. You don't need a response; you can just carry on. You don't need to find an answer to the question.

Sometimes that happens because the attitude is more quiet or more subtle. Sometimes it can happen because the attitude is one of calm and we're not noticing those calmer attitudes. So there are various reasons why we might not understand what the attitude is. But if you find yourself struggling, another question that can be useful is: What is being believed? Because beliefs are a form of attitude—a subtler kind of attitude, perhaps. Greed and aversion are more obvious: like that, don't like that. There's a belief in there. But beliefs don't necessarily have a flavor of liking or not liking. They're just, "This is what's true."

Sometimes that question of what is being believed can open something up. "Oh yeah, this is not okay,

what's happening." You know, the belief like "I'm a failure"—that was one of my beliefs connected with self-hatred. I'm a failure. And I began to see that that thought could happen and the belief not happen. It was just a thought. The thought and the belief were different.

So if you find yourself trying to change the state of your mind—like if there's sleepiness, dullness, restlessness, those are states of mind that often we try to change in order to put ourselves into a state that we can meditate in—try recognizing if you can be aware of the state. Often it can sometimes just be a belief, just the idea: "I can't be mindful while this is happening." If you're thinking that thought—"I can't be mindful while restlessness is happening" or "I can't be mindful while spaciness is happening"—you're already aware of that state. So try mindfulness before doing a shift, before making a change.

There are some other beliefs around practice that can get in the way and create suffering. Another belief I've definitely experienced—one I hung onto for quite a while—was that when I was mindful, experience would be clear. And if experience wasn't clear, it meant I wasn't being mindful right. To me, that was just true.

As I began practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya and beginning to explore the mind, there's so much in there. There's so much to see. It's like, oh my gosh, I was looking at this much. And when I started practicing with Sayadaw, it was like, whew. There is so much to see. Part of it is that we orient more to what's familiar, we orient towards what we recognize, and if we are aware and we're not clear about what's happening, we may think, "That's a problem."

But what we can know is simply this: I'm aware, and it's not clear. I'm aware, and I don't know. I don't know what the object is. Or I'm aware and it's really fuzzy—no clarity at all.

Some of these beliefs need to be pointed out to us. They're really hard to see, these beliefs around what we think of as meditation, what we think of as clear practice. This style of practice sometimes feels more busy. We're not settling in with one object, one experience. So sometimes it feels like there's a lot going on, and people say the mind is restless. But is it restless, or is it just knowing a lot? There are so many different experiences, so many different ways we can be aware.

I think often we stumble into a kind of clear awareness, or sometimes we stumble into our first taste of the mind really settling. It feels a certain way—clarity, quiet, no thoughts in the mind. That's one flavor. And whatever flavor we kind of stumble into first, we think that's what we're supposed to go for. That's it. That's what I'm supposed to be doing. And then we unwittingly limit ourselves by not recognizing there are different ways it can feel.

Awareness might feel focused and precise and clear. Sometimes it's broad and vague and fuzzy. Sometimes it's like we're looking at fog, and we're looking at fog. Sometimes there's clarity, sometimes there's not clarity. Sometimes we know what the objects are, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we know one object at a time, moment after moment. Sometimes we know lots of objects at the same time. There

are many different ways awareness works. So how is it working for you?

These ideas can get in the way. We can be unwittingly looking for something through these beliefs and perspectives.

I'll just say one last piece. This kind of curiosity about the attitude—it feels like it's not good news when we see these hidden perspectives, but it's what will lead the mind to understanding. At a certain point, you may actually be really happy you're seeing anger. It's like, yay! It's way better to see it than not to see it. Celebrate.

So let's just sit for a moment, letting the words fall away. You don't actually have to remember anything that I said. Don't worry about it. In my experience, it's in there. You can think of it like dharma rain. The water falls down and works its way through, and at some point, perhaps some bit of that moisture will arise with the growth of a plant. We don't have to hold on to any of it.

The practice is simple. Really simple. Just this. And from time to time, some curiosity about how I am with this.

Thank you for your practice. Thank you for listening.

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