

## Teaching Compassion in Prison: A Key to Learning

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**Abstract:** *In a project with long-term prisoners at HMP Dumfries, Scotland, tutors and students explore the notion and application of compassion, focusing in particular on the ways in which understanding compassion enables learning – not just the learning of academic subjects but also of interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. The project highlights the benefits of teaching a so-called extracurricular subject, at the same time as revealing its centrality to learning in the first place. A lack of adequate teaching time in prison, and the fact that compassion is not considered a core subject in education, are both cited as obstacles in consolidating the work of the project. The benefits of teaching compassion - emotional, intellectual and spiritual - was made clear through written and verbal student feedback. Three short workshops highlighted the enormous potential in developing and establishing compassion as both subject and practice in prison education. It is hoped that practitioners and researchers will support the expansion of this work throughout prisons.*

**Key words:** *Compassion, holistic prison education, arts-based interventions, spirituality, non-violent communication, rehabilitation, Buddhism*

### Introduction

Since I began work as Creative Writing tutor at Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Dumfries two years ago, my interest in and understanding of compassion has deepened. As a poet, it's always been clear to me that poetry relies on the writer being able to feel her way into the material; to practice empathy by imagining herself into another's world. But the more I thought about compassion and tried to practice it, the more I realised how central it is to learning of all kinds. It seemed to me that a lack of compassion created an obstacle in the path of learning, not just in learning academic disciplines ("I can't do this, I'm rubbish/too stupid/too lazy!") but also in learning interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.

I decided to organise a project in the prison to explore the notion of compassion, not specifically from the perspective of poetry (though this came into it) but more generally: What is compassion, and how can we learn to be more compassionate to self and other? My aim was to encourage students from all subject areas to get involved in thinking and talking about compassion, in the hope that by practicing it in our daily lives, we might be more open to learning of all kinds. I didn't want to frame it entirely around poetry because I wanted to reach a broader cross-section of students, those

who had never attended my classes and had no particular interest in literature or Creative Writing. In the end, however, poetry ended up being a central component of the project, not least because I invited two poets to come in and speak about their relationship to and understanding of compassion.

The project consisted of four sessions with 18 long-term prisoners (at HMP Dumfries, long-term refers to a minimum sentence of four years) over the course of a fortnight. I arranged for three people to visit the prison and offer workshops – two poets, Valerie Gillies and Gerry Loose, via the Scottish Book Trust's Live Literature Fund (<http://www.scottish-booktrust.com>), and Véréne Nicolas who facilitates workshops in non-violent communication and self-compassion.

### What is Compassion?

I began the project with an introductory session in which we discussed what we thought compassion was and how it manifested in our lives. We discussed definitions of compassion: Empathy; being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes; being open-minded and aware of others' needs; loving ourselves; accepting who we are and who others are, too. Many students were able to recall times when they were shown com-



passion and also when they were able to be compassionate towards others:

“I remember the time my co-pilot was imploding because his wife had left him – over the phone. He was broken. It’s something that happens a lot in here; people on the outside can’t bear the sentence any more than we can.” (‘Co-pilot’ is prison slang for ‘cell-mate’.)

“And what did you do for him? Were you able to help in some way?”

“Only because I understood where he was at. I knew how he felt. I just listened.”

We read a chapter from Marc Barasch’s book *The Compassionate Life: Walking the Path of Kindness* (2014), to look at ways in which people are compassionate to themselves and others. Barasch writes movingly on the events immediately post-9/11, a topic I thought the students would all feel strongly about - and they did. What we came to realise whilst reading and discussing the chapter, was that suffering opens us; that through it we enter a place of vulnerability, somewhere we often choose to suppress or avoid or even actively deny because it’s painful; but that it’s also a place that paves the way for compassion:

I think the common denominator is the breakdown of your ego to a place of vulnerability. We are brought up to think we all want to be happy and comfortable and up – and that’s what we’re programmed to go for. And I don’t think anybody in their right mind would want to go for the other. But when you have been put there, you become aware that you can relate to others who have been there as well – hearing firemen talking about finding bodies the night before and feeling the pain they were going through. And it wasn’t morbid. It was just...connected (Marc Barasch, *The Compassionate Life: Walking the Path of Kindness*, 2009).

As we read, it became clear that an understanding of the ways in which we are all interconnected is tantamount to an understanding of the roots of compassion. Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh calls it ‘interbeing’:

“Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be”, we have a new verb, “inter-be”. If we look into this sheet of paper [...] we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and there-

fore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist (Melvin McLeod, ed., *The Pocket Thich Nhat Hanh*, 2012).

Perhaps more importantly, though, it became clear that this understanding isn’t something only available to monks and other spiritual practitioners, but something we can all access and exercise.

We took it in turns to read pages of the chapter out loud. At times we found it quite difficult because the material was raw and everyone in the class – of course – knew what it meant to suffer. There was a section early on in the chapter about a fireman, Joseph Bradley, ‘a hardhat crane operator who had helped build the World Trade Center when he was twenty-two’ (Barasch, 2009), and by the time we got to the end of the page, we had to admit to having lumps in our throats.

Like so many workers at the site, he was overwhelmed by the carnage at the pile, sinking to the curb after his fist night under the savagely bright arc lamps, his head cradled in his hands. “That’s when the Salvation Army kids appeared,” he remembers, “in their sneakers with their pink hair and their belly buttons showing and bandanas tied around their faces. They came with water and cold towels and took my boots off and put dry socks on my feet.

“And then, when I got to Houston Street, a bunch more of these kids, all pierced and tattooed with multicolored hair, had made a little makeshift stage. They started to cheer as we came out, and that was it for me. I never identified with those people before, and I started crying, and I cried for four blocks. I can’t tell you – I was taken so off guard.

“I got home and saw my wife, who asked, ‘Joe, are you okay?’ ‘Sure!’ I said. You know the bravado came back. But she said, ‘Are you sure? Go look in the mirror.’ There I was with my filthy dirty face and just two clean lines down from my eyes.”

A community of love was the last thing anyone had expected to find in the mouth of Hell (Barasch, 2009).

### The Threat Of Change

We talked about how 9/11 and its aftermath represented a period of extreme suffering and that extremes like this often seem to bring out the best in humanity – the superficial layer we habitually offer the world is peeled back and we often feel liberated to reveal our true worth and value.

“Not always,” one of the students said, “9/11 is what sparked the whole War on Terror. How enlightened was that?”

“But Bush and the decision-makers in the White House never personally suffered,” I suggested, “They never engaged firsthand with the devastation and trauma of 9/11. They weren’t torn open by it. Instead of realising the potential for a compassionate response, they fought back with equal venom.”

“Isn’t that just a nice, idealistic way of seeing things? People retaliate. That’s what we do when we’ve been hurt.”

“Maybe,” I said, “But who says it has to be that way? Doesn’t it all come down to fear in the end? Isn’t it true that for most of us change is threatening and seeing things from a different perspective is frightening sometimes because it challenges our status quo?”

“OK, sure, but how do we actually bring about that change in the world? In other people?”

It’s a question that came up a couple of times during the project, but by the time we got to the final session, the students realised they all already knew the answer: change begins with the individual and only then because we choose it. We can only change ourselves and then witness the ways in which this impacts those with whom we inter-are. It’s so obvious we often overlook it. Spiritual practitioners and psychologists down the millennia have espoused it, and yet most of us still fail to put into practice the strategies that enable us to do the work of change. And it’s hard work, there’s no getting around it. It’s hard work for those of us *not* incarcerated; for those of us who are, there are even more challenges to overcome; not least, prison culture’s mode of accepted behaviour, which more often than not runs counter to the notion of compassion. In all-male prisons, pathological interpretations of masculinity must also be side-stepped (HMP Dumfries is a men’s prison).

Gaining an understanding of this is one thing, “the fundamentals”, as one student said; but putting it into daily practice is something else altogether. How do we remember to pause before we act or speak? What does it even mean ‘to create a pause’? Luckily, I’d invited Véréne Nicolas, an expert in seeking answers to these questions, and she opened the project’s first workshop with a phrase that has stayed with me ever since: Get curious not furious (Marshall Rosenberg, <https://www.cnvc.org/about/marshall-rosenberg.html>).

Véréne began by making clear distinctions between universal human needs and the strategies we might employ to fulfill those needs. For example, one of the students suggested ‘work’ as a universal human need, but we all quickly realised that this wasn’t a need, but a strategy to meet deeper needs – self-esteem, for example, or safety, stability, equality. In this way,

we were able to see that beneath every action, every choice, there is a human need seeking to be met. If we transfer this understanding to a situation in which conflict arises, a space suddenly opens up: We can now see that on both sides of the conflict, universal human needs are not being met. We were able to see that when we get upset or angry, it’s often because a deep need in us isn’t being met, and/or a deep need in the other person is also not being met. Even though the psychology of this wasn’t new to us, breaking it down in this way helped to open the space up again, to re-define Viktor Frankl’s famous words, ‘There’s a space between stimulus and response.’ If we can use this space to see into the needs of self and other, compassion will naturally arise.

### The Application of Compassion

Of course, creating space to open ourselves to compassion sounds great in theory, but in practice it’s often much more difficult to achieve. It’s something we need to train our minds to accommodate. I decided to test out the theory in a class with short-term prisoners (men sentenced to less than four years) later in the day:

“Imagine you’re being bullied by a fellow prisoner because you’ve got a physical abnormality, say, very short arms. What would you think about the bully and how might you react?”

“Tell him to fuck off. Arsehole...I’d clout him with my very short arms. Ha ha!”

“Would you ever wonder why he was being a bully?”

“Nah. What for? Arseholes like that aren’t worth thinking about.”

“And have you ever been an arsehole?”

“Oh sure. Who hasn’t?”

“And are you not worth thinking about?”

“I didn’t say that!” He paused, “Well, I’m not worth thinking about! I’m scum!”

### The Workshops

To begin the process of training the mind to allow compassion to arise, Véréne led an exercise on self-responsibility. The students were asked to remember a recent situation in which someone did something that made them angry or upset. They were then invited to break off into pairs and discuss the following questions, in response to the remembered incident: (i) What thoughts arise? (ii) What do you feel/sense? (iii) What do you need or value? (iv) What could you do now? One student said, “I’ve never done this kind of thing before. I wish there was more time to go into it more deeply.”

For the project’s second workshop, Valerie Gillies



visited the prison. Valerie is a poet and writer, originally from Ayrshire, and with a close knowledge of the local area, something a number of the students appreciated because many of them come from there. She led a session on natural wells and springs, sharing the pilgrimage she undertook to find them dotted around the country, as well as reading poems from her collection, *The Spring Teller* (2009). She also brought in photographs of the wells and springs which she passed around, and told tales of the people who had sought them out in times of hardship and ill-health. She said that visiting the wells and springs had been a kind of spiritual journey for her, not just because of the footsteps she was treading in, but because of the clarity and purity of the water she found in these places. In the words of one student:

“Valerie took a simple thing like a well and had us really think, not only about the purity of the water, but also about the fact that you could see through to the bottom of the well – how the water was clear all the way down.

She then led a meditation – we were to focus on a glass of water on the floor – and I was astounded that the deeper I gazed into the water, the more relaxed and content I became.”

I’d advertised the project by putting posters up around the prison, and I knew the mention of meditation would be a risk: it would likely mean that some prisoners wouldn’t even consider coming along because meditation is seen by many of them as “soft” or “for fairies”. However, Mindfulness Meditation had been taught recently at HMP Dumfries, so I knew it wasn’t a wholly new concept for everyone. And as it turned out, I needn’t have worried:

“Very enjoyable. Surprised at myself. Something I would never have participated in usually.”

We concluded the project with a visit from writer and poet, Gerry Loose. Gerry focused on readings from his two most recent books, a poetry collection, *Fault Line* (2014) and a book of prose about two oakwoods, one in Scotland and one in Finland, *An Oakwood Almanac* (2015). He also talked frankly about compassion – how he experiences it in his life and how the Buddha teaches it (he’s a practicing Buddhist). In particular, he talked about the Buddhist concept of *dukkha*, the first of the Four Noble Truths: all existence is suffering. Many of the students were already familiar with this, but it was good to be reminded. When we’re immersed in our own suffering, it seems so easy to forget that everyone else suffers, too. One of Gerry’s poem excerpts touched on compassion for non-humans, for flora and fauna, something that reminded us again of the complexity of

inter-being:

7 herons  
in the meadow  
horse & rider  
cantering  
across the bay  
by the old fish yair  
Gartness fault

he’s been by  
with the petrol strimmer  
by the fence  
a foot wide  
by 125 paces  
ten species  
dead or threshed  
could name them all  
called friends

am I foolish (Gerry Loose, *Fault Line*, 2014)

“I thoroughly enjoyed the last of the sessions,” one student wrote, “I found a great deal of inspiration listening to Gerry’s poetry and writing. I feel that he brought all the sessions together, and now I’m better able to understand the nature of compassion and how the concept relates to literature. A great end to things! Many thanks!”

### Student Feedback

But it wasn’t an end to things, it was a beginning. Three months on and we’re still talking about it. I think this is partly because the project was so successful – students were enthusiastic and engaged in a way I don’t often witness – and partly because it was flawed – there wasn’t enough time. It’s ironic that there’s often not enough time in prison to really explore themes and ideas deeply. The daily routine gets in the way; students come and go (are released); and funding is hard to come by for projects that are deemed extracurricular. Many of the students who attended the project gave me written and verbal feedback, and almost all of them mentioned the paucity of time. Almost all of them wanted more time in Véréne’s session to explore the more practical applications of compassion. This was a 3-hour workshop, but we needed at least a full day, if not two, to gain an understanding of needs, how to recognise and then meet them in self and other. If I ran this project again, I’d make sure to factor this in.

Nonetheless, seeing the students come together so well as a group, being mutually supportive and at times

quite open and vulnerable, even though it was only short-lived, was something to celebrate. It's not often I experience a sense of camaraderie amongst prisoners, at least not in a way that sidesteps the usual banter and machismo. It was good to witness students letting down their guard and I think for them it was a breath of fresh air, a relief, no matter how fleeting. When I suggested this to them afterwards, they said that learning about compassion was relaxing because they didn't have to pretend any more; they realised that everyone's in the same boat, even if the view from the porthole is a bit different.

Self-compassion is something we continue to talk about in class. It's the one aspect of the project that is most frequently revisited. This isn't surprising, I suppose, given that many prisoners struggle with low self-esteem and depression, states of mind that tend more towards self-loathing than self-love. For many of them, it's hard to recognise that if they can't be kind to themselves, they're going to struggle to be genuinely kind to others; that we need to love and nurture ourselves in order to go out into the world with compassion for others. And, most of all, that if we can show compassion for others, we will reinforce the love and understanding we have begun to nurture for ourselves. In other words, compassion is a regenerative circle, not a vicious one: in giving out, we receive something immeasurably valuable back. If there's ever a circle worth being trapped in, it's got to be this one!

A lack of self-compassion often manifests in very obvious ways in my students. For example, in my Creative Writing class, students will sometimes preempt the reading of their poem or short story with a disclaimer: "This is rubbish! You can tell me how rubbish it is when I've finished reading!" Nowadays I invite the whole class to talk about the disclaimer: What's the fear? What need isn't being met here? In what way does this statement set up a vicious circle of low self-esteem *and* self-righteous ego? How do we apply what we've learnt about compassion to this situation? Obviously, I've had to practice compassion in gauging these kinds of questions, too. The students are now openly enthusiastic about engaging in self-reflective and critical discussions. Interestingly, this has translated over into the classes in which I teach COPI (Community of Philosophical Inquiry) - many of the students in these classes also participated in the project on compassion. At the end of a recent session in which we discussed the philosophical question 'Who Am I?', one student said,

"I love these classes because they make me realise what crazy thoughts I have! I mean, I seem to get stuck

in thinking about things in one way only and COPI helps me see that there are lots of different ways of seeing and thinking about things. My head hurts after COPI but in a good way! I feel better somehow."

### Conclusion

The project has taught all of us that compassion is far more than just doing someone a favour or putting our own needs second. In fact, it's taught us that sometimes it's much more important to put our own needs first, in order to be able to extend ourselves for others later. But most of all, it revealed to us that compassion is at the heart of all genuine learning - learning that brings about a change in the individual and therefore a change in the world; that without compassion we remain closed off from opportunities, frightened to try new things and we hide behind habitual ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Compassion opens and enables us; it invites us to embrace a potential we never even knew we had, something that reaches far beyond the few skills learnt during a workshop. If we give ourselves a chance, we can relax into learning a new language or painting a picture without judging it, or writing a story and sharing it without the need to impress or be right or clever or 'good'. In teaching this project, it struck me that Compassion should really be one of the core subjects taught in prisons (and schools for that matter), and that education and human relationships would be all the better for it. Teaching this project has enabled the classroom (and all of us in it) to develop into a space that's much more conducive to learning - of all kinds.

### Note

I'm grateful to the SPS for agreeing to this project, to the Scottish Book Trust for enabling it, and to Vèrène Nicolas, Valerie Gillies and Gerry Loose for their passion and participation.

### References

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## Appendix 1

If you're interested in using the following as a teaching resource, please contact Vèrene Nicolas for an explanation of when and how these exercises can be best used (<http://www.verenenicolas.org/contact.html>).

### I. Exercise on Self Responsibility

Self-compassion can only happen if we take responsibility for and understand what happens in us when we get upset and react to someone's actions. When we don't take responsibility for the way we react, especially for what happens in our head (i.e. our thoughts), we project, blame, judge and often make things worse.

Self-responsibility means:

We recognise what belongs to us. That's our thoughts (interpretations, evaluations, judgments), our emotional feelings (what's in our heart), our physical sensations (what's in our body), what we want and value (our needs). When we recognise what belongs to us, we can understand why we reacted as we did, can open our heart a little and respond in a way that's easier on ourselves and the other person.

Distinctions:

- Self-responsibility is not blaming ourselves and making it our fault.
- Recognising what belongs to us does not mean we have to sort things out on our own. We can get help to sort things out.

Exercise:

1. Remember a recent situation where someone did something and you got angry or upset.
2. **Thinking:**
  - a. Identify what went through your mind in that moment: what did you think about the other person or about yourself.
  - b. Notice that and say, "That's what I am thinking about them. That's what I am thinking about myself. That's how I am thinking about what happened. It's not what actually happened. That's me judging and blaming them (or myself). These thoughts are mine. They are my thoughts. There are my judgements."
3. **Feeling/Sensing:** As you think about this situation,
  - a. How are you feeling in your heart now (upset, angry, sad...)? Name your feelings. Look at hand-out "Feelings (emotional states)" to identify your emotional feelings if you are stuck.
  - b. Notice the feelings and say, "These feelings are mine. These feelings are in me."
  - c. How are you feeling in your body (heavy, tense, achy, 'butterflies' in the tummy...)? Where in your body are you feeling? Look at handout "Feelings (physical sensations)" to identify your physical feelings if you are stuck.
  - d. Notice the feelings and say, "These feelings are mine. These feelings are in me. They are in my body."

#### 4. What you need or value:

- a) In relation to this situation, what is it that you want instead? Deep down, what do you value? What

are your needs? See handout “Universal Human Needs” to identify your needs if you are stuck.

b) Let yourself feel what you value or need. Try to relax in your body as you do this. Feel what it feels like to want respect, choice, friendship or whatever it is that your needs are in this situation.

**5. What could you do now** to address your needs and what would you do instead if the same situation happens?

a) Now that you know what your needs are and why you reacted the way you did, is there anything you can do that would give you what you want (i.e. meeting your needs)?

b) Now that you know what your needs are when situations like this happen, what would you like to do next time and make it more likely that your needs will be met?

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## Appendix II.

## Universal Human Needs (without reference to specific people, time, actions, things)

**Subsistence and Security*****Physical Sustenance***

Air  
Food  
Health  
Movement  
Physical Safety  
Rest / sleep  
Shelter  
Touch  
Water

***Security***

Consistency  
Order/Structure  
Peace (external)  
Peace of mind  
Protection  
Safety (emotional)  
Stability  
Trusting

**Freedom*****Autonomy***

Choice  
Ease  
Independence

Power  
Self-responsibility  
Space  
Spontaneity

***Leisure/Relaxation***

Humor  
Joy  
Play  
Pleasure  
Rejuvenation

**Connection*****Affection***

Appreciation  
Attention  
Closeness  
Companionship  
Harmony  
Intimacy  
Love  
Nurturing  
Sexual Expression  
Support  
Tenderness  
Warmth

***To Matter***

Acceptance  
Care  
Compassion  
Consideration  
Empathy  
Kindness  
Mutual Recognition  
Respect

To be heard, seen  
To be known,  
understood  
To be trusted  
Understanding others

***Community***

Belonging  
Communication  
Cooperation  
Equality  
Inclusion  
Mutuality  
Participation  
Partnership  
Self-expression  
Sharing

**Meaning*****Sense of Self***

Authenticity  
Competence  
Creativity  
Dignity  
Growth  
Healing  
Honesty  
Integrity  
Self-acceptance  
Self-care  
Self-connection  
Self-knowledge  
Self-realization  
Mattering to myself  
  
***Understanding***  
Awareness  
Clarity  
Discovery  
Learning  
Making sense of life  
Stimulation

***Meaning***

Aliveness  
Challenge  
Consciousness  
Contribution  
Creativity  
Effectiveness  
Exploration  
Integration  
Purpose  
  
***Transcendence***  
Beauty  
Celebration of life  
Communion  
Faith  
Flow  
Hope  
Inspiration  
Mourning  
Peace (internal)  
Presence

This list builds on Marshall Rosenberg's original needs list with categories adapted from Manfred Max-Neef. Neither exhaustive nor definitive, it can be used for study and for discovery about each person's authentic experience.



**Appendix III.****Feelings***(emotional states) Feelings that we experience in our emotional body***When Needs are Being Fulfilled**

GLAD, happy, excited, hopeful, joyful, satisfied, encouraged, confident, inspired, relieved, touched, elated

PEACEFUL, calm, content, absorbed, expansive, loving, blissful, satisfied, relaxed

LOVING, warm, affectionate, tender, friendly, sensitive

PLAYFUL, energetic, invigorated, refreshed, stimulated, alive, eager, giddy, adventurous, enthusiastic

RESTED, relaxed, alert, refreshed, energized

THANKFUL, grateful, appreciative

**When Needs are Not Being Fulfilled**

SAD, lonely, helpless, overwhelmed, dismayed, discouraged, disheartened

SCARED, fearful, terrified, nervous, horrified, anxious, lonely

MAD, angry, aggravated, furious, resentful, disgusted, irritated, annoyed, disappointed

CONFUSED, frustrated, troubled, torn, embarrassed, uneasy, worried, concerned

TIRED, exhausted, fatigued, indifferent, weary, overwhelmed, helpless, heavy

UNCOMFORTABLE, pained, uneasy, hurt, miserable, embarrassed

**Feelings***(physical sensations) Sensations that we experience in our physical body.***Expansive**

airy  
bubbly  
buzzing  
light  
radiating  
relaxed  
shimmering  
soft  
sparkly  
warm

**Contracted**

breathless congested  
dense  
constricted  
frozen  
heavy  
numb  
paralysed  
sharp  
sticky  
tense  
tight

**Burning**

achy  
flushed  
frantic  
hot  
itchy  
quaking  
pounding  
prickly  
pulsing  
quivering  
sweating  
throbbing

**Faint**

chills  
clammy  
cool  
damp  
dizzy  
fuzzy  
goose-bumpy  
nauseous  
queasy  
wobbly

**Shaky**

fluttery  
jumpy  
pained  
shuddering  
tingly  
trembling  
twitching  
vibrating

*Feelings exist in our bodies, not outside of them. Feelings generally have physical sensations associated with them. The aim is to develop awareness of our feelings, then consciously choose whether or not to express them.*

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