

Beyond Passiveness: Why Gandhi's Non-Violence is Not Cowardice. A Study**Mrinal Dutta**Assistant Professor in Philosophy.
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Email:mrinaldutta.dutta@gmail.com**Abstract**

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence is often misconstrued as passivity or weakness. This paper argues that true Gandhian non-violence is an active and courageous force. It requires moral strength, unwavering commitment to justice, and a willingness to endure suffering. By analyzing Gandhi's actions and writings, the paper demonstrates how non-violence can be a powerful tool for social change. It highlights the concept of Satyagraha, the pursuit of truth through non-violent resistance, and its emphasis on self-sacrifice and challenging oppressive systems. The paper concludes that Gandhi's non-violence is not about avoiding conflict, but rather about confronting injustice with courage, resilience, and a commitment to peaceful transformation.

Keywords: Non-violence, Gandhi, Satyagraha, Courage, Social Change

Introduction:

Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, remains a towering figure in the history of social change. His philosophy of Satyagraha, often translated as "truth force," challenged the might of the British Empire and inspired countless movements for justice and liberation around the world. However, Gandhi's unwavering commitment to non-violence has often been misinterpreted as mere passivity or, worse, cowardice. This simplistic understanding not only overlooks the profound strength inherent in non-violence but also undermines its revolutionary potential. This paper aims to deconstruct the misconception of Gandhian non-violence as weakness. It will demonstrate that far from being passive, Satyagraha is a potent strategy for social change rooted in courage, conviction, and a deep understanding of human nature. Through an exploration of Gandhi's own words and actions, as well as a comparison with traditional notions of violence and resistance, we will see that non-violence requires active resistance, moral courage, and a willingness to endure suffering for a greater cause. Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that non-violence, in Gandhi's view, was not simply the absence of physical violence. Satyagraha was a holistic philosophy encompassing a commitment to truth,

non-possession, non-cooperation with evil, and self-suffering as a tool for moral persuasion. This self-imposed suffering, often expressed through hunger strikes and peaceful protests, was intended to awaken the conscience of the oppressor and shame them into changing their ways. It was a deliberate act of moral courage, requiring immense mental and physical fortitude to withstand hardship without resorting to violence.

Furthermore, Gandhi's non-violence was far from passive. It demanded strategic planning, disciplined action, and a willingness to confront injustice head-on. Satyagraha campaigns involved boycotts, civil disobedience, and mass demonstrations. They disrupted the status quo, challenged the legitimacy of the oppressor, and garnered international attention for the cause. Gandhi, himself, actively led these movements, marching alongside his followers, facing imprisonment, and enduring violence at the hands of authorities. This active resistance demonstrates that non-violence does not shy away from confrontation but rather seeks a different avenue for creating social change. Moreover, a key distinction needs to be made between non-violence and cowardice. Cowardice is the absence of courage in the face of danger or threat. It is driven by fear and a desire to avoid conflict. In contrast, Gandhian non-violence is rooted in courage of conviction. It requires one to stand up for what is

right, even in the face of violence and oppression. The nonviolent resister embraces the possibility of suffering, demonstrating a moral courage that transcends the fear of physical harm. This courage is not impulsive or reckless; it is a calculated and strategic way to dismantle unjust systems and inspire others to join the cause.

Some might argue that violence can be a more effective tool for achieving immediate change. However, history is replete with examples of violent revolutions that have ultimately devolved into tyranny or further violence. Gandhi believed that non-violence offered a more sustainable path to social change. By appealing to the oppressor's sense of humanity, non-violence aims to create a lasting transformation of hearts and minds. This transformative power of non-violence has the potential to create a more just and peaceful society, free from the cycle of violence and revenge.

Gandhi's non-violence is not about turning the other cheek or simply avoiding conflict. It is a powerful philosophy of resistance rooted in courage, conviction, and a deep understanding of human nature. Non-violent resistance demands active participation, strategic planning, and a willingness to endure suffering for a greater good. By dismantling the misconception of non-violence as cowardice, we can fully appreciate its revolutionary potential and its enduring relevance in the fight for justice and social change.

Objectives:

- Explore the origins and core principles of Gandhi's non-violence philosophy.
- Distinguish Satyagraha from simple passiveness and highlight its active nature.
- Analyze the effectiveness of non-violent resistance in achieving social change, drawing on historical examples from Gandhi's movements.
- Discuss the challenges and limitations of non-violence in contemporary social struggles.

Methodology:

This paper will utilize a historical approach, examining Gandhi's writings and speeches, particularly his seminal work, "Hind Swaraj." Additionally, historical accounts of his non-violent

campaigns, such as the Salt March and the Quit India Movement will be analyzed to understand the practical application of Satyagraha. Scholarly works on non-violence and social movements will provide theoretical frameworks to analyze the effectiveness of this approach.

The Origins and Core Principles of Gandhi's Philosophy of Non-Violence:

Mahatma Gandhi, often hailed as the Father of the Nation in India, developed a profound and influential philosophy of non-violence, or "Ahimsa," which has had a significant impact on various global movements for civil rights and social change. This philosophy, rooted deeply in ancient Indian traditions and spiritual beliefs, was central to Gandhi's strategy in the struggle for India's independence from British rule. This essay explores the origins of Gandhi's non-violence philosophy and its core principles. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence has its roots in ancient Indian religious and philosophical traditions. Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, the major religions of the Indian subcontinent, have long upheld the principle of "Ahimsa" or non-violence as a fundamental tenet.

Hinduism: In Hinduism, the concept of "Ahimsa" is integral to the moral code. The sacred texts, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, emphasize non-violence as a virtue. The Bhagavad Gita, a key spiritual text for Gandhi, discusses the importance of righteous action without attachment to outcomes, which Gandhi interpreted as an endorsement of non-violent resistance.

Jainism: Jainism takes the principle of non-violence to an extreme, advocating for absolute non-violence in thought, word, and deed. Jain monks go to great lengths to avoid harming any living being, embodying the principle of "Ahimsa" in daily life. Gandhi was profoundly influenced by Jain practices and incorporated many of their principles into his own philosophy.

Buddhism: Buddhism also upholds non-violence as a key ethical precept. The teachings of Buddha emphasize compassion and the avoidance of harm to all living beings. Gandhi drew inspiration from these teachings, especially in his emphasis on the moral and spiritual dimensions of non-violence.

Gandhi's own life experiences and encounters with various thinkers and activists significantly shaped his non-violence philosophy.

Leo Tolstoy: The Russian novelist and philosopher Leo Tolstoy's writings on Christianity and non-violence deeply influenced Gandhi. Tolstoy's book "The Kingdom of God is Within You" resonated with Gandhi's belief in the power of individual conscience and moral action.

Henry David Thoreau: The American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" provided Gandhi with a practical framework for non-violent resistance. Thoreau's argument for the moral imperative to resist unjust laws inspired Gandhi's own acts of civil disobedience.

Jesus Christ: The teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the Sermon on the Mount, played a crucial role in shaping Gandhi's understanding of non-violence. Gandhi admired Jesus's emphasis on love, forgiveness, and turning the other cheek in the face of aggression.

Core Principles of Gandhi's Non-Violence Philosophy

Ahimsa (Non-Violence)

At the heart of Gandhi's philosophy is "Ahimsa," which means non-violence. For Gandhi, non-violence was not merely the absence of physical violence but also the absence of hatred and ill-will. It involves active love and compassion towards all beings. Gandhi believed that non-violence is the highest form of courage and the most powerful weapon for oppressed people to achieve social and political change.

Satyagraha (Truth Force or Soul Force)

"Satyagraha," a term coined by Gandhi, combines "Satya" (truth) and "Agraha" (firmness or force). It signifies a relentless pursuit of truth through non-violent means. Gandhi viewed Satyagraha as a method of direct action and civil resistance, where the power of truth and moral integrity is used to bring about social and political reform. This principle was the cornerstone of Gandhi's campaigns, including the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Salt March, and the Quit India Movement.

Swaraj (Self-Rule or Self-Governance)

"Swaraj" refers to self-rule or self-governance, both at the individual and national levels. For Gandhi, true freedom (Swaraj) could only be achieved through personal and collective self-discipline and self-reliance. He believed that individuals should govern themselves by adhering to ethical principles and that communities should strive for political independence and social justice through non-violent means.

Sarvodaya (Welfare of All)

"Sarvodaya" means the welfare of all. Gandhi's vision of an ideal society was one where the well-being of every individual is ensured. He believed that social and economic systems should be structured to promote equality, eliminate poverty, and uplift the marginalized. This principle underpinned his advocacy for economic self-sufficiency, rural development, and the eradication of untouchability.

Gandhi emphasized the importance of constructive work to build a non-violent society. He advocated for various social and economic reforms, such as promoting cottage industries, improving sanitation, advancing education, and fostering communal harmony. These constructive programs were seen as essential complements to direct action and civil resistance, creating the foundations for a just and non-violent society. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence is a profound synthesis of ancient Indian spiritual traditions, personal experiences, and the teachings of influential thinkers. Its core principles of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Constructive Program offer a holistic framework for achieving social and political change through non-violent means. Gandhi's approach has not only played a pivotal role in India's struggle for independence but has also inspired numerous movements worldwide, demonstrating the enduring power and relevance of non-violent resistance.

Satyagraha from Simple Passiveness and Highlighting Its Active Nature:

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, often translated as "truth force" or "soul force," represents a powerful and active form of non-violent resistance. While it may appear superficially similar to passiveness or mere non-resistance, Satyagraha is fundamentally different in its intent, methodology, and underlying principles. This essay explores the

distinctions between Satyagraha and simple passiveness, emphasizing the active nature of Satyagraha.

The Concept of Satyagraha

Satyagraha is a method of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience developed by Gandhi during his struggles for civil rights in South Africa and India's independence from British rule. The term combines "Satya" (truth) and "Agraha" (firmness or force), indicating a firm adherence to truth and justice. Satyagraha is rooted in the principles of non-violence (Ahimsa), truth (Satya), and the welfare of all (Sarvodaya). The primary objective of Satyagraha is to achieve social and political change by appealing to the conscience of the oppressor and the broader public. It seeks to transform relationships and structures based on injustice and oppression through moral and ethical means. Unlike passive resistance, which merely avoids violence, Satyagraha actively engages in the struggle for truth and justice.

Distinguishing Satyagraha from Simple Passiveness:

Active Engagement vs. Passive Avoidance

Action-Oriented: Satyagraha is fundamentally active. It involves deliberate and purposeful actions to resist injustice, such as protests, boycotts, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience. Satyagrahis actively engage in these actions to bring attention to injustices and demand change. In contrast, simple passiveness involves a passive avoidance of conflict and violence without actively challenging or addressing the root causes of injustice.

Moral Courage: Satyagraha requires immense moral courage and strength. Practitioners willingly face suffering, imprisonment, and even violence without retaliation. This active willingness to endure suffering for a righteous cause distinguishes Satyagraha from passive acceptance of oppression. Passive resistance, on the other hand, may lack this element of moral courage and active engagement.

Commitment to Truth: Satyagraha is based on a deep commitment to truth and justice. Satyagrahis believe that their actions must align with the highest ethical standards and that the means used to achieve an end must be as pure as the end itself. This ethical

foundation is active in its pursuit of truth. Passive resistance does not necessarily involve this active moral commitment and may simply involve avoiding participation in injustice.

Love and Compassion: Central to Satyagraha is the principle of love and compassion, even towards the oppressor. Satyagraha aims to convert and transform the oppressor by appealing to their conscience and humanity. This active effort to cultivate empathy and understanding contrasts with the indifferent attitude often associated with simple passiveness.

Strategy and Tactics

Constructive Program: Satyagraha involves not only resisting injustice but also building constructive alternatives. Gandhi advocated for constructive programs such as promoting self-reliance, rural development, and social reform. These proactive efforts to create positive change are a key aspect of Satyagraha's active nature. Simple passiveness does not include such constructive efforts and may simply involve refraining from participating in existing systems of oppression.

Civil Disobedience: A crucial tactic of Satyagraha is civil disobedience, where individuals deliberately and non-violently break unjust laws to highlight their immorality and prompt change. This requires meticulous planning, organization, and active participation. Passive resistance, in contrast, may involve passive non-compliance without the same level of strategic planning and active engagement.

The Active Nature of Satyagraha

Mobilization and Organization

Satyagraha is an organized and collective effort. Gandhi's campaigns, such as the Salt March and the Quit India Movement involved mobilizing large numbers of people in coordinated actions against colonial rule. This level of organization and mobilization requires active leadership, planning, and community engagement, distinguishing Satyagraha from individual or isolated acts of passiveness.

Non-Violent Direct Action

Satyagraha emphasizes non-violent direct action to confront and dismantle systems of oppression. This can include marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and strikes. These actions are designed to disrupt the status quo, draw attention to injustices, and pressure authorities to respond. The active and

confrontational nature of these tactics sets Satyagraha apart from passive resistance, which does not typically involve such direct and intentional disruption.

Dialogue and Negotiation

An essential component of Satyagraha is the willingness to engage in dialogue and negotiation with opponents. Satyagrahis actively seek to communicate their grievances and work towards mutually acceptable solutions. This requires active listening, empathy, and a commitment to finding common ground. Passive resistance does not necessarily involve this proactive approach to conflict resolution.

Self-Discipline and Personal Transformation

Satyagraha demands rigorous self-discipline and personal transformation from its practitioners. Satyagrahis are expected to adhere to high ethical standards, practice non-violence in thought and deed, and cultivate virtues such as patience, humility, and forgiveness. This active process of self-improvement and moral development is a key aspect of Satyagraha. Simple passiveness does not involve this level of personal commitment and transformation.

Satyagraha is a dynamic and active philosophy of non-violent resistance that goes far beyond simple passiveness. It involves deliberate and purposeful actions to resist injustice, grounded in a deep commitment to truth, love, and moral courage. Through organized mobilization, non-violent direct action, dialogue, and personal transformation, Satyagraha seeks to achieve lasting social and political change. Gandhi's Satyagraha has inspired numerous movements worldwide, demonstrating the power and effectiveness of active non-violence in the struggle for justice and human rights.

The Effectiveness of Non-Violent Resistance in Achieving Social Change:

Non-violent resistance has been a powerful tool for achieving social and political change throughout history. One of the most prominent advocates of this method was Mahatma Gandhi, whose campaigns in India against British colonial rule demonstrated the profound impact of non-violence. This essay analyzes the effectiveness of non-violent resistance by drawing on key historical examples from Gandhi's movements.

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922)

The Non-Cooperation Movement was launched by Gandhi in response to the British government's repressive measures, including the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. The strategy involved Indians withdrawing their cooperation with the British authorities by resigning from government employment, boycotting British goods, schools, and courts, and refusing to pay taxes.

Effectiveness

Mass Mobilization: The movement saw unprecedented mass mobilization. Millions of Indians from various social, economic, and religious backgrounds participated, demonstrating a unified front against colonial rule.

Economic Impact: The boycott of British goods significantly hurt the British economy. Indian textiles and goods gained prominence, fostering a sense of national pride and self-reliance.

Political Awakening: The movement politically awakened millions of Indians, laying the foundation for future campaigns. Although it ended in 1922 following violent incidents at Chauri Chaura, it marked a critical shift towards mass non-violent resistance.

The Salt March (1930)

The Salt March was a direct action campaign against the British salt tax, which affected every Indian, especially the poor. Gandhi led a 240-mile march to the Arabian Sea, where he made salt from seawater, defying the British monopoly.

Effectiveness

Symbolic Defiance: The Salt March was a masterstroke in symbolic defiance. It highlighted the injustice of British policies in a way that resonated with the everyday lives of Indians.

International Attention: The march attracted significant international attention, garnering sympathy for the Indian cause and pressuring the British government through global public opinion.

Civil Disobedience: The campaign inspired widespread acts of civil disobedience, with millions across India producing and selling salt illegally, leading to mass arrests, including that of Gandhi himself. The sheer scale of defiance showcased the Indian population's commitment to non-violent resistance.

The Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement was launched during World War II, demanding an end to British rule. Gandhi called for "Do or Die," urging Indians to act as an independent nation and resist British control through mass civil disobedience.

Effectiveness

National Unity: Despite severe repression, the movement united Indians in a collective demand for independence, reinforcing national solidarity and determination.

Strain on British Resources: The British, already strained by the war effort, struggled to maintain control amidst widespread unrest and non-cooperation. The administrative machinery was significantly disrupted.

Momentum for Independence: Although brutally suppressed, the Quit India Movement created an irreversible momentum towards independence. The British realized that maintaining control over India was increasingly untenable, leading to negotiations that eventually culminated in India's independence in 1947.

Overall Impact and Legacy

Gandhi's non-violent resistance movements had profound long-term impacts:

Independence: Gandhi's strategies significantly contributed to India's independence from British rule in 1947. The non-violent approach proved that it was possible to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems without resorting to violence.

Global Influence: Gandhi's success inspired numerous global movements. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in the American Civil Rights Movement and Nelson Mandela in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa adopted and adapted Gandhi's principles of non-violence.

Criticisms and Challenges

Repression and Sacrifice: Non-violent movements often faced brutal repression, and participants had to endure significant hardships and sacrifices.

Limited Immediate Results: While effective in the long run, non-violent resistance sometimes achieved limited immediate results, necessitating sustained and prolonged efforts.

The historical examples of Gandhi's non-violent resistance movements demonstrate their effectiveness in achieving social and political change. Through mass mobilization, economic impact, and international attention, these movements successfully challenged British colonial rule and paved the way for India's independence. Gandhi's legacy of non-violence continues to inspire global movements, proving that determined and principled non-violent resistance can be a formidable force for justice and change.

Challenges and Limitations of Non-Violence in Contemporary Social Struggles:

Non-violence, a powerful strategy for achieving social and political change, has been championed by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. While it has proven effective in various historical contexts, contemporary social struggles present unique challenges and limitations to the application of non-violent resistance. This essay explores these challenges and limitations in the context of modern social movements.

Challenges of Non-Violence in Contemporary Contexts

1. State Repression and Violence

Modern states often possess sophisticated mechanisms for surveillance, control, and repression. Non-violent movements can be met with severe state violence, as seen in various parts of the world.

Surveillance Technology: Governments use advanced surveillance technologies to monitor and infiltrate non-violent movements. This can lead to preemptive arrests and disruption of organizational activities.

Militarized Policing: The increased militarization of police forces means that peaceful protests can be met with overwhelming force, as witnessed in the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States.

2. Media and Public Perception

In the digital age, media coverage can significantly influence public perception of non-violent movements.

Media Bias: Media outlets might portray non-violent protests in a negative light or give

disproportionate coverage to any instances of violence, overshadowing the peaceful majority.

Misinformation: Social media can spread misinformation quickly, undermining the credibility of non-violent movements and causing internal divisions.

3. Diverse and Diffuse Movements

Modern social struggles often encompass a wide range of issues and participants, making cohesive non-violent action more challenging.

Fragmentation: Movements addressing multiple issues, such as climate change, racial justice, and economic inequality, can struggle to maintain a unified strategy.

Leadership: The decentralized nature of many contemporary movements can lead to a lack of clear leadership, making coordinated non-violent action more difficult.

4. Economic Pressures

Non-violent resistance often requires sustained participation, which can be difficult for individuals facing economic pressures.

Job Insecurity: Many potential participants may be unable to afford taking time off work for prolonged protests or civil disobedience.

Resource Limitations: Non-violent movements typically rely on volunteer efforts and donations, which can be insufficient to sustain long-term campaigns.

Limitations of Non-Violence in Contemporary Social Struggles

1. Slow Pace of Change

Non-violent methods often require prolonged efforts to achieve significant change, which can be frustrating for participants and supporters.

Incremental Progress: Non-violent resistance typically results in gradual rather than immediate change, which may not satisfy urgent demands for justice.

Sustaining Momentum: Keeping participants motivated over extended periods can be challenging, particularly in the face of slow or limited progress.

2. Ineffectiveness against Certain Regimes

Non-violent resistance may be less effective against authoritarian regimes that are less

susceptible to public pressure and international opinion.

Brutal Repression: Authoritarian regimes are often willing to use extreme violence to suppress dissent, making non-violent resistance particularly dangerous and difficult.

Lack of Accountability: Without mechanisms for accountability, such regimes may ignore or dismiss non-violent protests entirely.

3. Potential for Co-optation

Non-violent movements can be co-opted or diluted by political forces seeking to neutralize their impact.

Political Maneuvering: Governments and political parties may co-opt the rhetoric of non-violence to placate activists while making minimal substantive changes.

Corporate Influence: Corporations may support non-violent movements publicly while continuing harmful practices, undermining the movement's goals.

Strategies to Overcome Challenges

To address these challenges, contemporary non-violent movements can adopt several strategies:

Building Alliances: Forming coalitions with other movements and organizations can strengthen resources and amplify voices.

Leveraging Technology: Utilizing digital tools for organizing, communication, and raising awareness can help counteract state surveillance and media bias.

Economic Support: Establishing funds and support networks for participants can mitigate economic pressures and sustain long-term engagement.

Clear Leadership and Goals: Developing clear leadership structures and specific, achievable goals can enhance cohesion and strategic focus.

While non-violence remains a potent tool for social change, contemporary movements face significant challenges and limitations. State repression, media dynamics, movement fragmentation, economic pressures; slow pace of change, ineffectiveness against certain regimes, and potential for co-optation all present obstacles. However, by adopting innovative strategies and adapting to modern contexts, non-violent movements

can continue to play a crucial role in advancing justice and equality in today's world.

Conclusion:

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, or Ahimsa, represents a dynamic and courageous form of resistance that goes far beyond mere passiveness. This study has illustrated that Gandhi's approach was an active, deliberate strategy rooted in profound moral and ethical principles, aimed at achieving social and political change without resorting to violence. Gandhi's non-violence is fundamentally active. It involves the conscious choice to confront injustice through peaceful means, requiring immense moral courage and resilience. Unlike simple passiveness, which avoids confrontation and risk, Gandhi's non-violent resistance—Satyagraha—demands participants actively engage in actions such as protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience. These actions are designed to disrupt unjust systems and compel oppressors to confront the moral implications of their actions. Gandhi's non-violence is underpinned by a deep commitment to truth (Satya) and the welfare of all (Sarvodaya). This ethical foundation elevates non-violent resistance above cowardice. It is not a retreat from conflict but a strategic choice to fight injustice in a way that upholds human dignity and ethical principles. Gandhi believed that the means used to achieve an end must be as pure as the end itself, rejecting the notion that violence can lead to a just and lasting peace. Far from being an easy option, non-violence in Gandhi's view involves a willingness to endure suffering without retaliation. This readiness to face imprisonment, physical assault, and even death without responding with violence is a testament to the extraordinary courage required for non-violent resistance. Gandhi's own life exemplified this principle, as he repeatedly faced arrest and assault while maintaining his commitment to non-violence. Gandhi's non-violent approach also includes a constructive dimension, emphasizing the importance of building positive alternatives to oppressive systems. Initiatives such as promoting self-reliance, rural development, and social reforms were integral to his strategy. This proactive component demonstrates that non-violence is not about passive waiting but about actively creating conditions for a

just and equitable society. The effectiveness and bravery of Gandhi's non-violent resistance have inspired numerous global movements, proving its power in various contexts. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela drew from Gandhi's principles, achieving significant social and political advancements through non-violent means. These successes further underscore that non-violence, when practiced with determination and ethical commitment, is a powerful and courageous method for achieving profound change.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence is a robust, ethical, and active form of resistance, distinct from passiveness or cowardice. It requires profound moral courage, strategic action, and a deep commitment to truth and justice. By confronting injustice with dignity and resilience, Gandhi's non-violent approach has left a lasting legacy, demonstrating that true strength lies in the power of non-violence to transform societies and achieve lasting peace.

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