

**THE MAHAYANA *BODHISATTVA* IMPACT ON SRI LANKAN MONKS
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE *BODHICARYĀVATĀRA* AND
*BODHISATTVA PRĀRTHANĀ GĀTHĀ***

*Kadihingala Hemasiri
Sangjingyu*

**Editor in Chief
Dr. Iromi Ariyaratne**

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Abstract

Although Sri Lanka is known as a Theravada Buddhist country there is evidence of significant impact of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It began to receive some doctrines from the neighbouring country, India, through the Abhayagiri fraternity. As a result, we find abundant evidence to say that Sri Lanka has highly been influenced by the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal. Among that evidence, we see many literal works written from time to time until the present day. The present article is not intended as an attempt to provide an account of influence of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Ideal on Sri Lankan society. On the contrary, it will be confined to the impact of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal on Sri Lankan Buddhist monks with special reference to the Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā (Verses on Bodhisattva Aspiration) written by Ānanda Maitreya Thera. First, we will explain the history of the spread of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal from the time of the emergence of the Abhayagiri fraternity up to the present era. Next, we will give a brief account of the pamphlet of Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā. Finally, we will show how the Bodhicaryāvatāra has influenced Ānanda Maitreya Thera to write the Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā, by comparing some verses from both works.

Keywords:

Bodhisattva impact, Sri Lankan monks, Bodhicaryāvatāra, Ānanda Maitreya Thera,
Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā

The history of the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka can, as related in the traditional histories, be traced from the establishment of Buddhism by Elder Mahinda, 236 years after the demise of the Buddha, to around the middle of the third century B.C.E. The Buddhism established by the Elder Mahinda was known as Vibhajjavāda, afterwards named Theravada (doctrine of the Elders). The tenets of this school are said to have been recited at the three Buddhist councils by the Elders, hence the name 'doctrine of the elders. Royal people such as Ariṭṭha, the king's nephew, heard of the Dhamma as

¹ Lecturer, (MA) Dept. of Buddhist and Pali Studies, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka. PhD Candidate of School of Philosophy, Wuhan University, China.
Email: hemasiri123@busl.ac.lk

² Professor, (PhD) School of Philosophy, Wuhan University, China.
Email: sangjinyu@aliyun.com

delivered by the Elder Mahinda and proceeded to receive ordination. Afterwards, thousands of people native to Sri Lanka started to join the order. Thus, Buddhism was firmly established and its continuation assured.

Another important factor to consider in connection with this is that the establishment of the Great Monastery (Mahāvihāra), the subsequent hub of Theravada Buddhism, shows the purpose of the Elder Mahinda, which was to firmly establish and protect the Theravādin tradition which he had transmitted. From that time of introduction of Buddhism onwards, we see the rapid spread of Theravada Buddhism throughout the Island of Lanka under royal patronage and protection.

However, by sometime late in the first century C.E., there had come two schools that branched off from the Mahāvihāra: Abhayagiri (*dhammaruci*) and Jetavana (*sāgaliyā*), the very last two sects of the eighteen schools of Buddhism which were prevalent in India at that time.¹ In the course of time, they began to receive some teachings from the neighbouring sub-continent that were at variance with those of Mahāvihāra monks. They had views such as *Vetullavāda* that gave the rise to the Mahayana. Many scholarly works show that the Sri Lankan term *Vetullavāda* can be identified as Mahayana.²

The newly established Mahayana schools and their monasteries were even given royal patronage. They were active in Sri Lanka for a long period of time and made a powerful impact on all of the religious matters of the country. Scholars have given abundant epigraphical, monumental, literary, and sculptural evidence in verifying widespread and lasting Mahayana influence on the religious life of Sri Lanka.

Keeping this evidence in mind, it is quite possible to conclude that after the beginning of the Abhayagiri fraternity, Mahayana began to spread and exert its influence on the monks of Sri Lanka. It should be noted here that contrary to the growing Mahayana influence, the Mahāvihāra remained true to the tenets of the Theravada and gave their best to protect those teachings.

The adherence of the Abhayagiri to the teachings of Theravada is true even with the seeming evidence of Mahayana influence in the occurrence of the *Bodhisattva* ideal in the *Mahāvamsa* (5th century C.E.). But upon closer examination, we can see that the *Bodhisattva* Ideal in the *Mahāvamsa* is not identical to that of Mahayana. While Mahayanists admit Buddhahood as the only way to be free from *saṃsāra*, Theravadins believe in three ways, that is, *Buddha*, *Pacceka Buddha*, and *Arahant*. The *Mahāvamsa* clearly states that Duṭṭhagāmaṇi the Great (161-137) will be the first foremost disciple of Metteyya Buddha and that the other closer family members will also occupy high positions in relation to the coming Buddha.³ It is clear that the *Mahāvamsa* represents the Theravada *Bodhisattva* Ideal. However, with the beginning of the Abhayagiri fraternity, veneration of *Bodhisattvas* associated with the Mahayana became widespread, and a number of *Bodhisattva* statues were erected. Some rulers began to made vows to become a Buddha instead of the traditional goal of Arahant hood.

Despite the fact that Sri Lanka is the centre of Theravada Buddhism, the Mahayana *Bodhisattva* Ideal has affected monks in choosing the way to free from *saṃsāra*. Inquiring into the impact of the Mahayana *Bodhisattva* Ideal on Sri Lankan monks, its

history can probably be recorded from the time of Abhayagiri fraternity. Peter Skilling, quoting *Bhavya*, shows that the monks of Abhayagiri venerated *Bodhisattvas*.⁴

This veneration by the monks may be because they were inclined to believe that Buddhahood was their ultimate liberation. This is evidenced by an inscription at Mihintale of which the Abhayagiri fraternity took possession during the reign of Mahāsena (276-304). This inscription clearly refers to veneration of Buddha's Three Bodies (*Trikāya*), that is, *Dharmakāya*, *Sambhogakāya*, and *Nirmāṇakāya*. This idea of the three bodies of the Buddha is a distinctively Mahayana teaching. Paranavitāna, led by the reading "*bhikṣurb-bodhisattvo guṇākaraḥ*" in the inscription, concludes that the person who engraved the inscription seems to be a monk who aspired to Buddhahood.⁵ In addition to this telling inscription, scholars have provided abundant inscripitional and sculptural evidence not only from Abhayagiri precinct but also from other places, through which we can suggest that the Mahayana *Bodhisattva* Ideal greatly influenced the practice of many Sri Lankan monks.

Many centuries later, in around 11th century C.E., during the Polonnaruwa period, Parākramabāhu I, also called Parākramabāhu the Great, giving the supremacy to Elder Mahākassapa, restored the unity and maintained the purity of the order of monks of the three schools.⁶ This indicates that the Theravada was once again in the ascendancy in Sri Lanka at this time.

However, it is unwarranted to conclude that teachings such as the Mahayana *Bodhisattva* Ideal which had been maintained by the Abhayagiri and Jetavana fraternities completely vanished without a trace. Instead, their influence continued to be felt and may have at times been the prevalent way of thinking among large numbers of monks even after the reign of Parākramabāhu the Great.

Accordingly, we can observe a number of literal works in which the monks who authored them express the wish for attaining Buddhahood. We can read of this desire for attainment of Buddhahood in a variety of works such as the *Mahābodhivaṃsa* by Elder Upatissa (10th century C.E.), the *Jinacarita* by Elder Vanaratana Medhānkara (13th century C.E.), *Sinhala Mahābodhivaṃsa* by Elder Vilgammula (14th century C.E.), and the *Saddharmālaṅkāraya* by Elder Dharmakīrti (14th century C.E.). The Dharmadinnācārya Vimalakīrti Thera, the author of *Saddharmaratnākaraya*, wishes for himself and Parākramabhāhu VI (15th century C.E.), the king to whom that composition is dedicated, to obtain Buddhahood. Now, it is obvious that after the Anuradhapura Period, compilations of works containing the vow to become a Buddha had become more prevalent among the Sri Lankan monks.

In the Kotte period, in this connection, we meet two well-known monks, Totagamuve Sri Rāhula Thera, and Vidāgama Mahāmaiteya Thera. The former, in his poem *Kāvyāśekhara*, venerates the *Bodhisattva*, Nātha (Avalokiteśvara). In the *Girā Sandeśa*, Sri Rāhula Thera is beseeched to pray to Nātha in order to protect the Island of Lanka from diseases, demons, etc. It is more important to notice that in the same work, Sri Rāhula Thera is praised as the *Mahāthera* of Uturumūla⁷, which was owned by the Abhayagiri School. Thus, the connection with one of the schools which championed Mahayana thought and practices is evidenced. In his work

Buduguṇāḷankāraya, he expressly aspires to become a Buddha. He is said to have led Mahanetpamula,⁸ which was owned also by Abhayagiri School. Thus, abundant internal evidence from these and other literary works supports the conclusion that the Mahayana *Bodhisattva* path had been undertaken by many monks over successive generations. However, in recent centuries, the Mahayana School declined and eventually disappeared altogether.

In recent decades, there has been a considerable interest in examining Mahayana Buddhism, its lasting impact on the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, and what are the practices on the Mahayana path to Buddhahood. Moratuwe Sāsanaratana Thera is one of the scholars who have shown a great interest in Mahayana Buddhism. His book titled *Lakdiva Mahayana Adahas* written in Sinhala is quite noteworthy for its comprehensive discussion of Mahayana thought in Sri Lanka. He also has provided a valuable Sinhalese translation of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva. In addition, Henpitagedara Ñānasīha Thera translated the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* into Sinhala and composed many books making a considerable contribution to Mahayana Buddhist studies in Sri Lanka. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya Thera is also quite famous for his contribution to the aforesaid field. Among these three, Ānanda Maitreya Thera is particularly significant, for he has composed a pamphlet titled *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* to vow that he may become a Buddha in his personal Buddhist practice and path. This pamphlet contains some identical features to the the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and is influenced by that work. Due to the widespread distribution of that pamphlet he became popularly known by the name of Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Thera who aspires Buddhahood.

The *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* (Verses of *Bodhisattva* Aspiration)

The *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*, (*Bodhisattva* Aspiration) is a noteworthy book written by Ānanda Maitreya Thera. It belongs to his early phase of writing books, that is, to the year 1940. The name *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* literally means aspiring stanzas of *Bodhisattva*. It is, in fact, a pamphlet comprised of Pali verses which mainly addresses spiritual matters concerning the author's aspiration to become a Buddha in the future. The work is of great importance because it demonstrates the impact of Mahayana in previous centuries Mahayana impact on contemporary Theravada monks, despite the fact that Mahayana as a school has disappeared from Sri Lanka.

The work consists of 34 Pāli stanzas (excepting the stanza of Buddha veneration at the very beginning) out of which 22 are devoted to author's aspiration for Buddhahood. The very first stanza, the longest of the pamphlet, is devoted to veneration of the Gotama Buddha but it does not count towards the numbered 34 stanzas of the pamphlet.

Thenceforward, there are 10 stanzas that sum up how Gotama *Bodhisattva* accomplished the Ten Perfections. Each of the first ten stanzas contains an example of one *Jātaka* story relevant to the perfection within:

1. *Dānapāramitā* (*Brahmaisi Jātaka*)
2. *Sīlapāramitā* (*Mahāsīlava Jātaka*)
3. *Nekkhammapāramitā* (*Makhādeva Jātaka*)
4. *Paññāpāramitā* (*Ummagga Jātaka*)

5. *Viriyapāramitā (Mātuposaka Jātaka)*
6. *Khantipāramitā (Khantivādi Jātaka)*
7. *Saccapāramitā (Mahāsutasoma Jātaka)*
8. *Adiṭṭhānapāramitā (Mūgapakkha Jātaka)*
9. *Mettāpāramitā (Ekarāja Jātaka)*
10. *Upekkhāpāramitā (Lomahaṃsa Jātaka)*

In the eleventh stanza, the author worships the Gotama *Bodhisattva* who accomplished the Ten Perfections and in the twelfth, he says that he also undertakes to accomplish the Ten Perfections as did Gotama *Bodhisattva*. The stanzas from 13 to 25 are devoted to how the author aspires to become a Buddha and, then, in the 26th, he worships the Gotama Buddha by means of his practice of perfections. The next six stanzas deal with the authors' aspiration of being fully accomplished in good deeds that cause Buddhahood. In the 33rd stanza, the author aspires that he may be able to do the same in every succeeding rebirth. Last of all, in the 34th, the author proclaims his unshakeable intention to attain Buddhahood.

When it is considered the author and his works along with his long career, it cannot be assumed that the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* is unique to the author the contents of the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* appear to be deeply influenced by the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva. At the same time, some differences can be seen between the two works that are very probably due to authors' natural tendency to base his work on his native traditions. That is, while Śāntideva was a Mahayana monk, Ānanda Maitreya Thera was a Theravada monk, and due to this there would naturally be some differences in their outlook and expression. Despite such traditional differences, the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* seems to be composed largely under the influence of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

The Impact of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* on the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is a significant work known to various Buddhist traditions such as that of Tibet, and is often called *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* in Tibetan.⁹ The title literally implies 'descending into the conduct leading to Buddhahood'. It was written by Śāntideva (685-763) and its philosophy and outlook are according to the teaching of Mādhyamika Tradition.

The text contains more than 900 stanzas in Sanskrit and is divided into 10 chapters. It speaks of the benefits of having *Bodhicitta* (which may be broadly translated and understood as the 'heart' or 'mind' of awakening), the types and characters of *Bodhicitta*, the bad consequences of having wicked thoughts about the *Bodhisattva*, the good consequences of having virtuous thoughts about the *Bodhisattva*, the confessing of sins, etc.

Overall; it talks of, as the title of the work indicates, the way to descend into the attitude and conduct leading to Buddhahood. That it gives an extensive knowledge of the path of the *Bodhisattva* to the attainment of Buddhahood is the chief merit of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. In the second stanza, the author explains why he composes this work says; "Nothing new will be said here, nor have I any skill in composition.

Therefore, I do not imagine that I can benefit others. I have done this to perfume my own mind.”¹⁰

Through these words the purpose of the work is illustrated, although we may also imagine that this is an illustration of Śāntideva’s humility. His work has, in fact, had tremendous impact on the Mahayana school and its practitioners. In the very next stanza he further explains thus: “While doing this, the surge of my inspiration to cultivate what is skillful increases. Moreover, should another, of the very same humours as me, also look at this, then he too may benefit from it.”¹¹

It seems to me that the *Bodhicaryāvarāra* has been as successful as Śāntideva wished, for Ānanda Maitreya Thera, well versed in Sanskrit, must have read the *Bodhicaryāvarāra*, been moved by it, and proceeded to compose a pamphlet of *Bodhisattva* aspiration. It is significant that in addition to Ānanda Maitreya Thera, a number of Sri Lankan monks, as mentioned above, have authored various literary works with various purposes and have indicated their aspiration to become a Buddha. These works are not fully devoted to their aspiration to become a Buddha. But the *Bodhisattva Prārtanā Gāthā*, like the *Bodhicaryāvartāra*, is an independently written work merely devoted to the author’s aspiration to Buddhahood.

When we go through the *Bodhisattva Prārtanā Gāthā*, we are constantly reminded of the work of Śāntideva. This may be because Ānanda Maitreya Thera had previously carefully read the *Bodhicaryāvarāra*, and preferred to compose a pamphlet though he had already chosen the path to the Buddhahood. For him, it was a personal decision which he was sharing through the pamphlet. On the other hand, the purpose of Śāntideva was evidently to invite the world to Buddhahood.¹² We can imagine that Ānanda Maitreya Thera was taking up Śāntideva’s invitation. In any case, Ānanda Maitreya Thera has followed Śāntideva to proclaim his intention to become a Buddha. In this connection, we may compare these two stanzas from our two works:

Bodhicaryāvarāra:

Today I summon the world to Buddhahood and to worldly happiness meanwhile. In the presence of the Saviours, may gods, titans, and all rejoice.¹³

Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā:

Thus, may I vigilantly practice the Ten Perfections and, following the example of the past *Bodhisattvas*, devote myself to the service of others, and thereby subdue the forces of evil – May I attain Buddhahood.¹⁴

It also seems that since Ānanda Maitreya Thera wanted to compose a small book, so he had to restrict the extent of the work. He chose to mostly base his work on the *Bodhicaryāvarāra*’s third chapter within which the formal adoption of *bodhicitta* is vowed by Śāntideva. It appears likely that Ānanda Maitreya Thera only wanted to vow a firm adoption of *bodhicitta* and, for that, the fourth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvarāra* was the most instrumental. The 12th stanza of the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* has a close relationship to the 23rd Stanza to the third chapter of *Bodhicaryāvarāra*, in which both the authors proclaim that they have undertaken to train on the path towards the Buddhahood.

Bodhicaryāvarāra:

so too, I myself shall generate the Awakening Mind for the welfare of the world;
and just so shall I train in those precepts in due order.¹⁵

Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā:

May I too be able to fulfill these ten virtues to wit, *Dāna, Śīla, Nekkhamma, Paññā, Viriya, Khanti, Sacca, Adīṭṭhāna, Mettā, Upekkhā*.¹⁶

The veneration of the *Bodhisattva* is especially salient among the monks in the Mahayana tradition. Despite the fact that *Bodhisattva* is not always an ordained one [there are ordained *Bodhisattvas* as well...see, for instance, Kṣitigarbha *Bodhisattva*], the monks of Mahayana tradition highly venerate them. This is seen in the *Bodhicaryāvarāra* too, the very last stanza is dedicated to the veneration of Mañjuḥṣa *Bodhisattva* thus; “I bow down to Mañjuḥṣa through whose inspiration my mind turns to good. I honour the spiritual friend through whose inspiration it grows strong.”¹⁷

From the generally accepted Theravada point of view, it is strange and not suitable for a monk to venerate a *Bodhisattva* that is not ordained. However, Venerable Ānanda Maitreya Thera, who was a fully-ordained Theravada monk, who seems to have followed Śāntideva, says that he bows down to the *Bodhisattva*; “I pay my adoration to the benign Bodhisatta who thus fulfilled the ten Perfections such as *Dāna, Śīla* and the like for very period for the sole purpose of saving the suffering mortals from the ocean of *Samsāra*.”¹⁸

In the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*, we also see certain opinions that are parallel to those in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, that tell of how the author conducts himself on the path to the attainment of Buddhahood. For instance,

I am medicine for the sick. May I be both the doctor and their nurse, until the sickness does not recur.¹⁹

May I be a light for those in need of light. May I be a bed for those in need of rest.
May I be a servant for those in need of service, for all embodied beings.²⁰

Let us compare the above two stanzas from *Bodhicaryāvatāra* with the following of *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*; “May I be a servant to those who require my service whether great or small. May I be a physician or at least merciful attendant to the sick.”²¹

A perusal of the *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā* will reveal numerous further parallels to the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. For now, we will let the above illustrate our point. The Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya was a virtuous Buddhist monk, well-versed in scriptures in both Pali and Sanskrit. It may be that his very good ability to go through any works in Pali and Sanskrit that made him rare among his fellow Theravada monks. His exposure to and facility in reading Mahayana literature resulted in his adoption of a path usually thought of as Mahayana in nature, that of the Path to Buddhahood.

Conclusion

During the Polonnaruwa Period Sanskrit was greatly employed in *Pirivenas* and literary movement. Although the monks of Sri Lanka were formerly restricted to the

Pali tradition, with the new trend of Sanskrit they were given chances to go through the Buddhist Sanskrit works. As a result, Mahayana thought started to creep into the tradition through their literary works. This circumstance, as above evidence shows, resulted in the growth of the practice of Mahayana in ancient times in Sri Lanka, and even after its demise as a distinct sect, it continuously exerted influence on Buddhist culture without interruption. Even in modern times, this fact is affirmed by the works such as *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*. Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya serves as an example of the ongoing impact of Mahayana thought and practice on the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka.

Abbreviations

Bpg. *Bodhisattva Prārthanā Gāthā*

EZ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*

Ibid. Ibidem (In the Same Place)

Mv. *Mahāvamsa*

Endnotes

¹ Geiger 1912: p. 27

² Mudiyanse 2018: p. 2

³ Geiger 1912: p. 227

⁴ Chandawimala 2016: p. 125

⁵ EZ IV: p. 244

⁶ Mv LXXVI: p. 27. See also EZ I: p. 130; EZ II: p. 106

⁷ Gamlat 1988: p. 237

⁸ Adikari 2002: p. 199

⁹ Vaidya 1960: p. IX

¹⁰ Crosby and Skilton 1995: p. 5

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.: p. 22

¹³ *evaṃ sarvamiḍaṃ kṛtvā yanmayāsāḍitaṃ śubham|
tena syāṃ sarvasattvānāṃ sarvaduḥkhaṇḍaprasāntikṛt||* (3-6)
Ibid.

¹⁴ *iti ahamidha dānādīvasā appamatto - satatamanusaranto bodhisatte hatīte,
parahitaniratto pāramī pūrayitvā - vijjiya sakalamāre buddhabhāvaṃ labheyyaṃ.* (34)
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¹⁵ *tadvadutpādayāmyeṣa bodhicittaṃ jagaddhite|
tadvadeva ca tāḥ śikṣāḥ śikṣiṣyāmi yathākramam||*(3-23)
Crosby and Skilton 1995: p. 22

¹⁶ *aḥampi dāṇṇaṃ ca tatheva sīlaṃ - nekkhammapaññaṃ viriyaṃ catho'pi,
khantiṃ ca saccaṃ ca adhiṭṭhitim ca - mettaṃ cupekkhaṃ ca papūrayāmi.* (12)
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¹⁷ *mañjughoṣaṃ namasyāmi yatprasādānmatih śubhe|
kalyāṇamitraṃ vande'haṃ yatprasādācca vardhate||*(10-58)
Crosby and Skilton 1995: p. 143

¹⁸ *iti bahutarakālaṃ dānasīlādito taṃ - bhavasālilanidhimhā sattasantāranāya,
samupanicitavantaṃ bodhisambhārasāraṃ - parahitapaṭipannaṃ bodhisattaṃ namāmi.* (11)

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¹⁹ *glānānāmasmi bhaisajyaṃ bhaveyaṃ vaidya eva ca|
tadupasthāyakaścaiva yāvadrogāpunarbhavaḥ||*(3-7)
Crosby and Skilton 1995: p. 20

²⁰ *dīpārthināmahaṃ dīpaḥ śayyā śayyārthināmahaṃ|
dāsārthināmahaṃ dāso bhaveyaṃ sarvadehinām||*(3-18)
Ibid.: p. 21

²¹ *atthinameso mama cattabhāvo – dāsoṭṭhu uccāvacakiccakārī,
rogāturānaṃ yadi vā bhisakko – dayādhanō'paṭṭahitā bhaveyyaṃ.* (24)
Bpg, 26

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