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Choosing to Live Well with Pain and Illness

Interview of Vidyamala Burch by Tami Simon of Sounds True



*Tami Simon speaks with **Vidyamala Burch**, who for over 30 years has lived with chronic back pain as a result of a car accident, multiple surgeries, and congenital spine weakness. Searching for a way to cope with her situation she started practicing mindfulness meditation to help accept and move beyond the pain. She is cofounder of the Breathworks organization in the U.K. where she teaches mindfulness-based approaches to living with physical pain and illness. She is also author of the new Sounds True book **Living Well with Pain and Illness**. Vidyamala speaks about what it means to turn toward pain and soften, and how to live one moment at a time.*

Tami: You're listening to Insights at The Edge. Today I speak with Vidyamala Burch, and I must say that this is one of the most moving and powerful Insights at The Edge that I've yet to record. For over 30 years Vidyamala has lived with chronic back pain as a result of a car accident multiple surgeries and congenital spine weakness. Searching for a way to cope with her situation she started practicing mindfulness meditation to help accept and move beyond the pain. She is the co-founder of The Breathworks Organization in The United Kingdom, where she teaches mindfulness based approaches to living with physical pain and illness. She is also the author of the new Sounds True book, *Living Well with Pain and Illness: The Mindful Way to Free Yourself from Suffering*. I spoke with Vidyamala about her 30 experience with chronic pain. What it means to turn towards pain and soften, and

about how to live one moment at a time. Here's my conversation with Vidyamala Burch.

Tami: Vidyamala, you have a unusual approach—I think unusual approach I think, in terms of a popular view of how people deal with pain—which is, instead of trying to get rid of pain we actually turn towards it, and I'm wondering, just to begin here, if you could talk a little about what that means; turning towards our pain, and also how you discovered that as an approach that could be helpful.

Vidyamala: O.K. Well I've discovered that as an approach that can be helpful having completely exhausted the other methods. Because I'm an active person, I'm quite driven, quite ambitious in a certain way. I've had pain for a long time now, since I was 16 years old, and I'm now nearly 50. My initial response was to try and push on through it and live my life as if I was normal, and I did that for probably ten years, um, I wouldn't say successful because I was not in a very good state mentally all of that time, but successful in the sense that I managed to keep going. And then I completely ground to a halt when I was 25 and there was a hospital chaplain when I was in hospital in Auckland, New Zealand. He first introduced me to working with the mind. So this lovely, lovely, lovely gentleman sat by my bed, took my hand and invited me to remember a time when I'd been happy and a place when I'd been happy and I put my mind back to the mountains of the south island of New Zealand where I'd done a lot of hiking and climbing as a teenager and been ecstatically happy at time in those mountains. I put my mind back there and my experience completely changed, even though I was still lying in a hospital bed, still in desperate pain...lost, confused, physical pain...but my experience completely changed by the thought I turned my mind towards. Now obviously at that time I turned my mind towards more of a visualization practice, but that opened the door to me working with my mind. So then after that I got some books out of the library on meditation, relaxation, and just tried to explore this very, very new topic for me; that I had this mind and I could use this mind to change how I experience myself in the present. After a few years of doing more visualization types of meditations I realized that I was

still using my mind to escape my experience, if you know what I mean, so I was becoming more adept at working with my mind but I was still trying to, if you like, will a sort of parallel universe into existence which meant I was still at odds with myself a lot of the time. And then it was when I came to England in the 1980's and I picked off a bookshelf a book by Stephen Levine called, *Who Dies ?*, in a book shop and he's got a chapter in that book called on working with pain and he talked about turning towards your pain, you know, turning around, stopping running away, turning around and facing it and being with it and that really resonated not so much in the sense that that's what I was doing, but in the sense that I knew that that's what I needed to do if I was to have peace of mind. And so I started more this sort of meditation which was more turning towards my experience which was traditional mindfulness practice. This thing I called pain was actually made up of many, many different components, and as long as I was running away from it, turning against it, trying to escape it, I was never investigating it to find out, "what is this thing called pain?" What I teach now is that you can divide the experience of pain into two main elements: primary and secondary suffering. The primary suffering is the actual physical sensation in the body in the moment, which is in my case back pain, leg pain, neck pain on the whole. But actually that is very, very bearable and it's changing all of the time, sometimes it's quite bad and sometimes it's really not very bad at all. And in the secondary suffering are all of the ways that I say to myself, "I don't want this experience. I don't want this to be happening to me." So this thing you call pain, which is so dominant in the life of someone who's living with pain. There's one that you can't change, which is the actual physical sensation in the moment, but everything else you can change. All of those sort of mental, emotional, and physical secondary reactions you can change. And by working with that actually these sorts of pain become much, much diminished and your quality of life improves—well, in my experience—almost beyond recognition.

Tami: Now that's how I want to investigate my own experience and start making a distinction between primary pain and secondary pain. How would I do that—this is primary and this is secondary—how do I start knowing where that line is?

Vidyamala: I think that the way you know what's secondary is it's got a quality resistance, a quality of, well I find the word *resistance* very immediate, it's like a kind of blocking quality. So the primary is when you turn towards it, the primary has almost got a quality of movement to it, fluidity, change process.

Whereas the secondary is something that's quite rigid, it's got a quality of aversion in it, I suppose, of resistance and aversion. So that's what I look for in my experience, like where is that felt the sense of resistance, and then if I take my tension to that felt sense of resistance I breathe into it, I soften around it. I bring kindness towards it, gentleness. Another word I really love is, *tenderness*...so bringing to that resistance versus felt sense, mentally or physically or emotionally then that changes. Does that make sense? There's a quality of resistance in your being. That's what secondary suffering is.

Tami: Uh huh...That's helpful. Now to give our listeners a sense can you talk a little bit about your own life journey with pain and the kind of pain that you've experienced, and maybe share with us one breakthrough you had in working with the pain that led you to some of the discoveries you're now sharing with other people?

Vidyamala: Ok, so as I said earlier on, I was a very fit and active teenager and child and I was brought up New Zealand in the 60's, where it was actually a very nice place to be brought up. It was quite safe, so my experience was just sort of running around the place as a child and doing lots of sports. And then when I was 16 I lifted someone out of a swimming pool during a life saving practice, ironically, and my back started to hurt. So it wasn't a kind of dramatic dropping over at the time, but it was more of an insidious onset of pain. But quite quickly it became quite bad, and when I bent over I couldn't stand up again and I found sitting very difficult. And it turned out that during that lifting I'd fractured a part of my spine, which is a congenital weakness that I didn't know I had up to that point. So I had surgery the following year when I was 17, I had a fusion operation. There were complications from the fusion operation which meant I had to have another big operation six months later, so that was when my chronic pain really set in. But I was still pretty active at that time so I could walk and lead what looked like a normal life, although I was living with pain. And then when I was 23, which was about five years later, I was a passenger in a car accident. The car had been thrown into a telegraph pole at the side of the road, on the open road. And amongst other injuries, I fractured the middle of my spine. So the first surgery was on my lower spine, and then I crushed the vertebrae in my middle spine, which wasn't diagnosed at the time so I was sort of walking around with this extreme pain after that accident, and I also got very bad whiplash in that accident and you don't want to get whiplash when you've got a fused spine because there's now where for the shock to go. So I've lived with a lot of neck pain as

well. But even then, after about four months I went back to work. I was working as a film editor at the time, sound editor, and working very long hours. As I said earlier, when I was 25 I had gotten to a point of collapse, really--I couldn't keep running any longer.

I would say my major breakthrough was very, very intense...I had some injections in my spine that went wrong so I ended up in intensive care, neuro-surgical intensive ward, and I had to have a particular test which meant I had to sit up for 24 hours after the test. At this point I had been flat on my back for several months. So I couldn't really sit up. It was asking the impossible. I think, I can't really remember, but they didn't have these modern beds that kind of prop you up, so I was trying to hold myself up. It was in the middle of the night in this very, very intense situation in this ward with people who were terribly ill which of course I'd never been around. It was my first real exposure to very intense human suffering like that. And I had these two voices in my head—it was very, very, very interesting—and one voice was saying, "I can't bear this! I cannot get through till morning!" and another voice was saying that you had to. So I had these two voices, one saying, "Oh My God! I'm going to go mad! I can't bear it! It's impossible!" and another voice saying, "you have to get through till morning"—"I can't!" "You have to!" "I can't!" "You Have to!" It was a very, very strong dialogue between these two sides of my mind, and then I had another voice come in very, very strongly and this voice said, "you don't have to get through till morning, you just have to live the moment." It was a very, very strong voice and immediately my experience changed dramatically. So I went from being very tense, very agitated, desperate I would say, to being quite relaxed and some sort of happy confidence came in. So I thought, "I can live this moment. I can survive this moment, and I can live this one, and I can live this one, and I can live this one..." So I realized that this whole concept of getting through till morning was not real somehow. I'd lived my life up to that point thinking in terms of getting through till the morning, or the next year, or whatever, but in that experience I realized all of that was fabricated and all I had to do was live this moment fully, but of course at that point I'd never meditated, I had no experience of any kind of spiritual path. I had been nominally brought up as a Christian, but it was all rather nominal. So I did get through till morning, obviously, and I was really fascinated by what happened. It felt very real, very true, and I thought I need to find out about my mind, about time, about space...what is the future, what is the past, what is the moment? And you know when you're young, I was only 25, it was all really fascinating and very alive and

intense and engaging. I would say my life changed profoundly in that moment in the middle of the night when I was in hospital when I was 25. All of my work since then has sprung from that experience...realizing that there is only this moment to live and that I can live this moment.

Tami: I'm curious if you could connect for us what you said about resistance and secondary suffering and this discovery about just this moment?

Vidyamala: Well, that's an interesting question. I'd often say before I had that discovery I must've been absolutely crushed by secondary suffering. This whole idea of, "I can't get through till morning, Oh my God! I can't bear it...this is impossible!" All of that was something I was doing to myself with my secondary suffering. With my inappropriate reaction, and I don't mean that in a derogatory sense, but just my unawake, unaware mind doing its thing. That was all secondary. So, maybe what the discovery is—I'm just thinking this aloud now when I talk to you—but maybe if one is fully in the moment, living in the moment, open to whatever is happening there isn't any secondary suffering. That secondary suffering is all generated in terms of wanting something different to happen in the next moment... waiting for a better moment in the future when there's no pain. I mean let's see, that's putting it very crudely but all of those kinds of thoughts and emotions like..."oh my God I can't bear it, not this again!" Behind that there's a kind of fantasy about being free of whatever it is in the moment that one doesn't like. So I'm thinking that if one is truly present then there isn't going to be secondary suffering.

Tami: I'm curious as somebody who deals a lot with pain, are you in pain right now?

Vidyamala: Yah—I am in pain right now.

Tami: Could you describe to me from a primary suffering perspective what that pain is like for you right now?

Vidyamala: Ok...so in my lower back I've got...the back of my vertebrae has been removed so in that part my spine, my spinal cord isn't protected. I get a lot of pain there, so right in there I've got a kind of toothache sort of feeling in the middle of my lower back. I've got pain in my sacrum. I've got pain down my right leg. I've got pain in my toes and in my feet. I've got a bit of a headache.

Tami: Vidyamala! I think most people would say that you sound like you're in terrible shape!

Vidyamala: Well one of the things that's very interesting...cause I don't feel...yes, not great. Physically it's not good, but overall, you know, I'm really enjoying talking to you. It's not like I'm thinking, "Oh no! My life's awful!" Actually I'm quite happy to be here right now living this life. What I was going to say is that one of the very interesting things about living with pain for a long time, like I have, is I can't remember now what it's like not to be in pain. So therefore I don't have the comparison, and of course a lot of distress is because...say if you fell over tomorrow and broke your leg you'd have a memory of what you felt like today when you didn't have a broken leg...so you say, "Oh no! I've broken my leg, it's awful!" Well, you might not but most people would. And I think if yesterday I hadn't had back pain and today I had this it would be pretty unbearable, but because I've had this for so long my whole sort of baseline has changed and this has become my normal. So I live my life from this baseline normality and then I have the all of the normal sort of range of happiness and joy and interest in life that anybody has, but my baseline normality is just an altered one.

Tami: I think what's remarkable in you describing your current state of being is here you are the author of a book, *Living Well with Pain and Illness*, and I can imagine someone hearing this who listens and saying, "How incredible that this woman can be living well with this much pain!"

Vidyamala: Well I suppose it's like, "What's the alternative?" I sort of feel that I have a choice and this is after I've been on this path for nearly half my life now. I sat in hospital when I was 25, and so it's been 25 years, and I have been through some really tough times. I wouldn't want people to think that it's all just been lovely and happy because that's not true. But 25 years...that's a long time to be living this sort of thing and trying to sort of come to terms with it and make peace with it and so on, and I suppose my current feeling is that I have a choice to live well or I have a choice to be completely miserable. I've got a lot of pain anyway, so why make it worse? Why make it worse on myself through my mental, emotional and physical reactions if I have a choice? See what I'm saying?

Tami: I totally see what you're saying...

Vidyamala: I think when I learned...a real breakthrough for me was when I really, really, realized it wasn't going to go away. So the whole fantasy of, "I wish I could go back to the way I was when I was ten," the whole fantasy of going back in time to when I didn't have pain...when I really laid that fantasy to rest and I thought, "Well OK! Here's the deal. You've got pain and you can have a good life, and you've got pain and you can have an awful life...that's your choice. Which do you want to take?" And I thought, "Well OK, I'll have pain and I will really commit myself with every ounce of my being to living well with pain because that's a better choice. That's a better life. And actually, generally speaking, I have quite a good life...which is interesting, as you say, because when I describe my pain it sounds pretty grim, but compared to a lot of people I don't have a bad life in terms of my mental and emotional experience I suppose.

Tami: I can imagine that part of what might be hard for somebody who has pain the idea of turning towards it and being with it is...you know, it could overwhelm me, it could be more terrible than I could experience.

Have you ever had the experience of feeling—since you've been working with these kinds of practices—like, "Oh my God! I'm just going to be overwhelmed by the amount of pain I'm tuning into?"

Vidyamala: I've had times where, you know, I've cried a lot...just felt absolutely sort of overwhelmed by sadness, I would say. Maybe being overwhelmed isn't quite the right...I've never felt like I couldn't stay with it. Sometimes when I've felt a lot of sadness inside...there's something really rather beautiful about that. When you're really in an experience and you're just...it's appropriate when you have this kind of pain, it's appropriate to feel sad from time to time and sometimes I've just cried, and cried, and cried and I've felt something sort of that had been really sort of stored up in my body flow out. So actually that's not been an unpleasant experience surprisingly! It's been a real and true experience. I used to find that when I did a body scan that I would go to sleep and that's very common...people just sort of zone out. If you've been really resisting being in your body for a long time and you're learning how to be in the body just to kind of shut down and go to sleep quite quickly is not uncommon. I just say to people, "Never mind. Maybe you're very tired and you need to have a rest, but just keep doing it." I've found over the years I very, very rarely go to sleep now. So it's like I've learned how to very gradually, very gently be with my experience.

Tami: One of the interesting parts of the book, *Living Well with Pain and Illness* was you talked about these

two patterns of resistance that most people seem to fall into when they're not turning towards their pain, and you called it blocking and drowning. I wonder if you could describe both of those for us?

Vidyamala: OK, so, I mean this is just something that I've come up with based on my own experience and the people I've taught, but I think most people do tend to have these patterns. If you've got a primary experience that you're not accepting and you resist, then I suppose the most common one is the blocking, which is a sort of denial. So blocking is... I call it blocking because that's what my experience is. I'm mainly a blocker, so I wish I could do this and you could see my body language. What I'm doing is I'm pushing away with one hand, which is my pain, and then with the other hand it's a bit like you're trying to lead your life a bit like a hamster in a wheel going round and round and round, but only with one side of your experience. I think that blocking manifests things like overworking, all sorts of addictions, I think all addictions are manifestations of blocking. So smoking, eating, recreational drugs, prescription drugs, talking, you know I think that sometimes those of us in pain, we can resist our experience by talking a lot which is, of course, exhausting. So all of those kinds of running away from habits I would say are blocking, and then drowning is the opposite. So generally speaking I think we can block to a point where we get exhausted and then we crash and when we crash we're overwhelmed. SO drowning is really overwhelmed, so in my case I can—not so much these days, thankfully—but in the past I might block for months on end, getting more and more protected and frenzied and brittle and alienated and then, you know, eventually I'd get exhausted and I'd go to bed and the pain would be overwhelming and I'd be depressed and I'd lose perspective and my pain was everything in my life and I was never going get out of bed again. So that's more the drowning side, but I still think drowning is a manifestation of resistance because you're not just with your experience in a kind of honest and true way. So they're both blocking and drowning are both expressions of an unwillingness to be just with one's experience in the moment, just an alive human being who happens to have pain in the moment. Because if you're just with your experience in an honest and true way, if I'm with my experience right now in an honest and true way—yes I have got the pain that I describe to you earlier—but because I'm not either blocking or drowning I can also have perspective which means I can also notice the pleasant things in the moment and the pleasant things in the moment that I can describe to you are: there's a kind of pleasant feeling around my heart, which is just the pleasure of talking to you—there's a sense of

tremendous kind of engagement and interest about having this conversation, you know just sort of being in communication with another human being in a genuine and real way, so that's very pleasurable—there's a light in the other room which has a very lovely kind of glowing color—I've got warm feet, that's pleasant. Do you see what I'm saying? When you're neither blocking nor drowning then you can open to the tremendous kind of breadth of your present moment experience that will include the pain but will also include the pleasant things. When you're drowning, you're just experiencing the pain. When you're blocking you're numbing yourself down to the pain, but you're also going to numb yourself from the ability to feel things like love. So when I'm blocking, which I'm good at, I genuinely don't experience my pain as much. It's very, very interesting that I can genuinely think, "Oh, my pain isn't too bad." But then I'll see a sunset and I won't feel anything. It's horrible. You just feel like you're only half alive because I've sort of anesthetized myself to a whole band of sensitivity in my awareness.

Tami: Well I certainly relate tremendously to what you're saying, more so in terms of emotional pain than physical pain and I'm sure many listeners...

Vidyamala: Yah...all of the same principles apply to any kind of discomfort however it's manifesting.

Tami:...And the question I have for you is so...I notice at any given moment that I'm either blocking or just drowning and just giving up and saying, "I can't deal!", or I'm actively distracting myself through some blocking mechanism of some kind. What do I do?

Vidyamala: I think all of this stuff...I was going to say it's simple, but I think one of the things I laugh about, of all the things I teach at Breathworks, is that I always say to people, "This is not rocket science." Anyone can sort of understand the principle of having pain, not liking it so you block and you resist it...you're either going to be blocking or drowning, and I think as soon as you can notice it something changes, that's the wonderful thing about awareness. You know as soon as you think, "Oh, I'm in a state of resistance", as soon as you say this to yourself something will soften, something will come alive. I think if you notice that you're blocking then the practice is to turn towards your experience and soften. If you notice that you're drowning the practice is to broaden your perspective. So the image I use is like a lens on a camera. So if you're drowning it's a bit like you zoomed on a close up lens. So you need to pull back to more of a wide angle lens on your experience,

and maybe actively look in the moment for what's pleasant. There's always something pleasant. I've not yet found a single person who couldn't find at least something, you know, one tiny thing that's pleasant. When I was in hospital a few years ago after I had another operation which was really hideous and I got an infection afterward and was very ill. I tried practicing this and I thought, "What's pleasant in my experience right now?" I noticed the crisp sheets that I was lying on, and I thought, "Well that's pleasant! You know, I've got nice clean sheets on my bed." After that my experience changed. So to summarize...the first thing to do is to notice what's happening. Bring mindfulness, awareness to your experience and notice it. If you notice you're drowning and broaden out your perspective and sort of scan around for something pleasant while still sort of staying open to the unpleasant so you're not hardening against that. If you notice that you're blocking then soften your breath, that's a really good one because if one is blocking one is generally contracting around the breath in some way. So soften the breath and turn towards your experience with this softer more kindly attitude. Say hello to the thing it is you're running away from. I think what I haven't said yet, which is tremendously important, is that at the core of all this work is to notice the fact that everything is always changing, everything is impermanent. So to try and get a much, much more fluid sense of one's experience. When you're blocking against pain, then the assumption is that the thing that you're blocking is fixed and hard and the enemy and you just want to get away from it. If you can turn towards it and drop into the more fluid nature of it then it becomes really quite bearable and even quite interesting. If I do that with my pain when I catch myself hardening against it, which is a lot of the time if I'm honest, if I turn towards it, investigate it...I'll then realize that it's now my whole back that's hurting, it's just my lower back that's hurting. And actually, what are the sensations? There's throbbing, there's burning, but there were tingling sensations, and that's quite interesting...and maybe that's even a little bit pleasant. So you sort of go into it and investigate it and tease it apart and realize that it's much, much less dense and solid than you realize.

Tami: it's interesting that when you talked about how you first started working with pain you visualized a fabulous beach scene and you were in a way turning towards something pleasant in imagination, but that it seems that your work progressed and that it's more turning towards whatever is happening in the present moment which includes the primary pain and then the pleasant experiences that are just here right now, no matter what you're going through.

Vidyamala: I think for me, and people are all different, but because I'm a little bit of a blocking, escaping sort of type, then there's more sort of active visualizations and I can do them and they're pleasant. But they're a little bit tricky for me because I can use them to escape. Whereas if you're always turning towards your experience and just investigating what's there and looking for the seeds of joy—because there's always seeds of joy in one's experience—alongside being open to and honest about the unpleasant sensation then I know that I can stay true to my quest for wholeness. In a way that's what I want to be. I want to be a whole human being who's just living an honest human life which includes acknowledging the difficult and acknowledging and paying attention to the pleasant and the seeds of positive emotion that are always present.

Tami: I have to say talking to you I feel so moved and impressed by who you are and...I really do...and I think what I'm reflecting on is how people become initiated into spiritual truths through so many different avenues and ways and how in a sense physical pain and physical hardship has been your path of initiation, and I'm wondering what you think about that?

Vidyamala: There was one young woman who...this young woman who came on a course a couple of years ago who had had cancer about five years before. She'd been a merchant banker, actually a bit of a high flyer...had been to Cambridge University, had a good degree was a merchant banker...working hard, partying hard. She got cancer, had to go through Chemo and got through that but the treatment had damaged her bone marrow and she was left with chronic fatigue as well. So when she came on our course she was just trying to get her head around what had happened. She had already been doing my CD's every day for a few months just completely of her own volition. She got a hold of the CD's and said she was already well on the way actually very, very motivated. And then about a year ago she had to, she was told if didn't have a bone marrow transplant she would definitely get leukemia, of the worst sort...and most probably die. She was only 34 or something like that. Because she was doing all of this work on herself and meditating and being open she really sat with that choice. She didn't just think, "Well I'll definitely have the transplant." She really sat with, "Do I really want to do this? Am I ready to let go of my bone marrow and get someone else's bone marrow?" She was on a retreat with me just before she made the decision and it was so moving seeing her being so honest with herself, so sincere. She decided to have the bone marrow transplant, which was a very, very grueling

treatment, she's come through it and I got a card from her the other day. I thought it was really amazing. She was saying that since she made the decision to have the transplant she's had hardly any fear or stress. She'd just been able to stay with her experience and she's had a deep sort of equanimity towards life and death. She was quite open to whatever happened. There hadn't been all this kind of clinging... "Oh my God I'm terrified of dying and I must live!" She's just been able to be with her experience through the whole process. It's been so impressive to witness. Because she had had all this experience with chemo before she came across our work and meditation she knows what it's like to fight it every step of the way, and for it to be absolute hell...so she'd had that sort of experience and now she's had this other experience of what it's like to just be with each limited experience no matter what it is and to come out the other side with 100 percent bone marrow that's functioning, that's working..so it's been completely successful. And it's so beautiful and she is just a beautiful person, I mean extraordinary to see her, she's only 35! She's really got something! She's got something really profound. Now I don't

believe she would necessarily have got that if she hadn't been so challenged by her health and having to let go of everything again. She's had to let go of her career, she's left with chronic fatigue and without the ability to live a really active life, but she is utterly at peace. And that's a beautiful thing to see, isn't it? A human being who—I would say, I mean I don't think I'm being grandiose—I would say that she is utterly at peace with herself. She's funny, she's witty and she's really got something through this experience of being humbled by her body has enabled her to wake up to something completely new. Very, very Beautiful!

Tami: It's been really an honor and a great upliftment to talk to you. I really appreciate it. I've been speaking with Vidyamala Burch, the author of a new Sounds True book, *Living Well with Pain and Illness*. Her own remarkable story and her own discoveries that she's put into a mindfulness training program that she explains in quite some detail in the book, *Living Well with Pain and Illness*. Thank you for speaking with me today..

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