From Ego to Expansiveness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:01

Nice to see you all again. I'd like to talk tonight on the topic of from ego to expansiveness, which is a description of the unfolding of the meditation practice, the development of insight over time. The talk, in a way, is a complement to the guided meditation that we did this morning on developing an expansive awareness.

So we start off working with this question of ego. This term ego is very central to meditation practice and a very fertile ground for inquiry, looking into what constitutes the ego. And I'll say just right now what I mean by this word ego. It's really the sense of self or the sense of I that we have in life. We express it many, many times during the day. "I feel this. I want that. My body is this way. My mind is that way." So we use this I, me, my sense incessantly, without in the beginning ever stopping to think what it means, where it comes from.

So I'd like to talk about this sense of self, the sense of I, how it manifests in the practice, and how the experience of it changes over time in meditation.

First of all, I'd like to look at the nature of the ego on what I'd call a fairly gross level. On the gross level of the ego, it expresses itself by movements of mind—movements of mind generally expressing, to some extent, self-concern, self-interest. And so we find, as we come to sit in meditation, that we have sort of endless tapes of desires and wants and hopes and worries and doubts and fears and likes and dislikes. All these movements of mind have been built up over years and years of habit.

If we start looking into these movements of mind and what they're all about, they're basically expressing a very simple principle. They incline us toward pleasure and away from pain. So all the movements of our thoughts are toward achieving more of what we consider to be pleasant and away from trying to avoid or have less in our life of what we consider painful or unpleasant. You could say that the movement of self, the movement of ego on this gross level is marked by the factor of wanting, of desire, of volition, or will, or motive. All these terms are more or less synonymous and point to the I manifesting itself in some movement of mind.

What all of these movements are expressing, whether it's the positive movement of wanting or the negative movement of not wanting, is a preference. We carve out a preference for ourselves and we try to make it a reality in the world. And this is perhaps our great mistake.

There's a text, an old Chinese Zen text, written by the third Zen patriarch, a master called Seng-ts'an. He was called the third patriarch in the Chinese tradition of Zen. His book is called the Xin Xin Ming, which

means discourse or treatise on the faith mind, on the mind that knows faith or trust. He begins this little treatise in this way: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind."

So it's this fundamental discrimination between what we like, what is pleasant, and therefore what we propel ourselves toward, versus what we dislike, what we term unpleasant, which we try to move away from. Around these two movements, our whole life is lived. If you look at the activities of ninety-nine percent of the minds in the world, they're revolving around these particular poles.

So our life is really driven by this wanting and avoiding. And it's incessant. We find the incessant nature of it when we come to sit quietly, and we find that the wanting and not wanting doesn't stop, even though we can't do anything about it. We're sitting still for forty-five minutes. We can't satisfy any of those desires. We can't move away from any of the things that are arising. And yet, the mental mechanism goes on and on and on.

There's a constant sense when we first come to meditation of spinning. It feels like the mind is always spinning, churning, going round and round and round. It's a bit like getting on a carnival ride—one of these rides with the painted horses. You climb on one and it goes around and around and around, only on this one you can't get off. You only paid for one ticket, but you can't find the way off. So you keep going round and round.

There's a term in the ancient Asian traditions for this phenomenon, for this way of living, and the term is samsara. This is the realm of samsara. Samsara is usually translated as the wheel of cyclic existence.

Old Pali term and a Sanskrit term, the wheel of cyclic existence, implying that our life is somewhat like a wheel that keeps going round and round and round.

In the East, they tend to understand this wheel in terms of reincarnation, the doctrine of rebirth—that we are born into this life having been born many, many times before in different existences. We live out this life, we die, and as long as there's still some mental motion, that gives rise to another birth, another existence in the future. This wheel of being born and dying, being born and dying, goes on and on until we understand freedom, until we discover where freedom lies. We're bound, say the Asian traditions, to continued rebirth, reincarnation.

Frankly, I don't think it matters one bit for your meditation practice whether you believe in reincarnation or not. It makes absolutely no difference to your practice. So you can take this view up and cherish it, or you can leave it at the door as you leave the retreat, and your mind will be a little bit freer.

But there's another way to understand this wheel of birth and death from a moment-to-moment perspective: every time a new desire arises, a new self is born. That self persists for as long as the desire is in force, and when it ends, that self dies. Then, a few minutes later, or a few seconds later—however strong your practice is—another self is born that goes through its own lifetime, and it dies. So we can

understand this cycle of birth and death on a moment-by-moment level, that the "I" is being born again and again in different forms.

First there's the wanting "I"—the "I" that's sitting and wanting the bell to ring at the end of a sitting. Then there's the angry "I"—the "I" that is resentful that the pain in the knee has come just now when the mind was starting to get calm, and that lasts for a while. Then there's the hungry "I" that waits for the tea to be served at 5:30 when it's a minute late. All these forms of "I" are coming up again and again and again, lasting for a while and then dying.

The thing we find when we come to meditation practice is we're not able to get off this wheel either. There's no end to these repeated cycles of desire and aversion, liking and disliking. With each new one that arises, there's more sense of unrest, more sense of being pulled along by our desires and aversions. So again, we're trapped, caught on this wheel, the wheel of samsara.

Over many years of our lives, these incessant arisings of wanting and not wanting can develop into quite a tangle because they tend to get interconnected and conflict often develops. One of your desires will conflict with one of your fears—a very common experience. We want something, but at the same time we're afraid. So the tangle of emotions begins to build as these impulses and drives get interconnected.

Let me give you an example of how this can work. Let's say we have someone in their teens who doesn't feel very good about themselves. There's a certain degree of non-self-acceptance in that person. And if one doesn't accept oneself, one doesn't necessarily have the belief that others will accept one either. So, expecting that other people won't like one, having contact with others comes to be uncomfortable—somewhat threatening. We expect to be rejected or put down. Because of the pain involved in those relationships, we may tend to withdraw.

So we've already had a movement of volition. There's a belief in us that we won't be likable, therefore we tend to withdraw from relationships by our own volition, our own motive. This is a movement of ego, of the self.

But that withdrawal is painful. It leads to loneliness. Not wanting to live with the loneliness, not being willing to accept that, we tend to try to escape it. So we develop, perhaps as an escape, an interest in something else—a sport, our studies, or a musical instrument. There's another element of volition: wanting to get away from the loneliness, we take up another activity.

Then we see that some skill is possible with that activity. We develop it more fully, and we find that we become well known for it. This is very gratifying. People begin to respect us for our skill, whether it's on the football field, or playing the guitar in a rock band, or getting straight A's at school. Then, out of that sense of inferiority, we tend to build ourselves up based on that platform. We say, "Ah, I'm not no one. I'm actually good at something." And there arises pride—another movement of wanting to be recognized, wanting to feel superior.

As we become more proud, unfortunately we're stuck in a withdrawn position from our earlier habits, and we tend to become more arrogant toward people. We want to show our superiority, so we start acting in a prideful way, and then people begin to withdraw from us.

So another movement of volition expresses the need to feel superior, and it too has a reaction in the outside world. We find ourselves more and more isolated, and that can become increasingly painful. In time we may take to other escapes such as exploitative sexual relationships, drugs or alcohol, or the quest for more power and status.

Over time, what initially began as simply a certain degree of lack of self-acceptance gets built up into a whole persona, an entire personality woven around these different impulses that have accumulated. If we look into our own development, we can see that for each one of us there are probably a number of such threads—various ways that our personality has developed along similar volitional lines. We have created much of our own personality, not knowingly or intentionally, but volitionally through our will.

We come into meditation and bring along with us this whole web of what we call our personality, what we call the "me." As we begin to develop the quality of awareness, that web of personality starts to be illuminated. We begin to shine a light within on that web. The tangle that has developed over many, many years starts to unravel under the patient light of awareness—sort of a thread at a time, bit by bit.

This is one of the truly healing aspects of meditation practice: we really can come to see ourselves clearly on that psychological, emotional level. Awareness shines the light of understanding throughout our personality, and then some of this tangle starts to unravel. With that comes a greater sense of freedom.

This process can't really be rushed or forced. The knots that we've built up have to come out of their own accord. We just have to be there, patient and attentive. Over time, given that sort of attitude, the knots will untie. Our attitude basically has to be one of non-interfering—not making any more attempts with our will, with our volition, with our ego, with our motives to alter that process, but rather simply letting it take place. Just let it happen.

Then we move in meditation to a more subtle level, a more subtle manifestation of ego. We find that thoughts and impulses continue to go through consciousness, but a change starts to take place: the degree of our identification is reduced. We don't identify so strongly with each movement of mind that occurs. This is a major change.

Earlier, when we came to sit in meditation, if our mind moved to some form of wanting, we felt as though we moved with it. This is the state of being identified with our thoughts, with our desires. As awareness becomes stronger, there's a sense that we can be still and the thought can move through without affecting us so much.

As the identification is reduced, there's a sense of stillness, even though movements of mind still come, even though desire still arises, even though annoyance may still appear. There's more a sense of being still

within and observing that movement. We don't feel so tied to it. This is a step back from this wheel—the first step back from being taken around and around on this wheel of samsara. It's an important change.

One of the reasons that the environment here is created the way it is, as I mentioned earlier in the retreat, is to take away some of the external stimuli that make up our daily lives. You notice one of the characteristics of the retreat environment is that there's not much going on outside ourselves that we have to relate to. We're thrown back again and again on our own experience. This is very useful for the transformative process.

Outside, the way we kept our patterns, this web of personality, the way we kept that ball together was by constantly hooking it on things in the outside world. We'd say, "Well, naturally I have desire because there are so many attractive things here. I want a new car and a new house and a new stereo and a new boyfriend. Of course that desire is natural." Or, "Well, of course I get angry. There are so many silly people around. This person did that to me and then this person did that. Well, of course I get angry."

We come into a situation like this and we don't find it so easy to hook our patterns on outside influences. We start to realize the absurdity of some of these movements of mind. Of course, it's not that those movements stop because we come in here—I'm sure you recognize that by now. Just because there's no good reason for them doesn't mean they go away. Because unfortunately, or fortunately, it's the same mind. Same mind.

So we go in for our lunch one day and we're patiently standing in the queue like a good boy or girl. And then we see the person in front of us get to the dessert and go, one, two, three, four. And we think, "How could they? How could they do that? Don't they know there are ten more people still to come? And look, that's the best dessert we've had all week." And this incredible rage can boil up. Incredible. And take us over for the rest of the afternoon every time we see that person.

We begin to see that maybe our response wasn't appropriate to the situation. Maybe it was an exaggerated response that we had to that person. And what we're seeing is the movement of mind without the hooks, without the external situation to pin it on.

What is happening in this kind of process is that the personality is undergoing a reducing process. I don't mean this like a weight loss clinic, that it's getting slimmer, but more in the sense of a chemical reduction. A reducing agent is something that breaks molecules down into their constituent parts, into their atoms. And so our personality is getting broken down into its basic components, without these threads of thought and justification to tie it all together.

Really, we come here in order to go through a breakdown. That's part of what we're about here. I'm sure you recognize it by now. And this can be a little bit disturbing. I came here to get together. I didn't come here to fall apart. And it can seem like the whole structure of our personalities is dissolving in this experience. Everything that we've taken for granted about ourselves suddenly starts coming into question.

Well then, who am I really? What kind of person am I? A good person or a bad person? An angry person or a thoughtful person?

So the structure of our self is starting to actually open up. It's starting to unfold a bit. We need to have at this time, at this particular time in the practice, we need to have a good bit of faith to see this process through, because it's a little bit unnerving. Everything that we thought was solid and real and that we could take a stand on in life starts sliding out underneath our feet. And we have to have faith that that process is to be trusted. We must have faith to trust and allow that process to continue, because it's very helpful.

Really what it's a movement from is from complexity to simplicity. Our personalities have gotten built up into very complex forms by our interactions, this web that we've woven over years and years. And when we come into a situation like this, they're getting taken back to the very simple forms. Just the bare emotions are coming up. Anger. Wanting. Loneliness. Unworthiness, lack of love, guilt, joy, happiness. Just these very basic emotions start coming through without necessarily any justification, any reason for being there.

At times it feels like we're quite naked, quite raw in this process, as though all the layers of masks have been peeled aside and we've just opened our heart and can be reached right in and felt. Just a bare grief or anger, loneliness, whatever. Those very bare emotions start coming through.

And then we see that all the movements of mind that we built up around that personality don't really matter so much. That's not really important. All the justifications that we've made for these feelings, we start to recognize that those mental states are just our basic nature, that we don't have to tie them together with any threads of explanation or volition or motive. And we start to see that what we took to be ourselves isn't as solid as we thought it was. We start to see that the ego, what we think is me, isn't really a solid entity. It's just these different mental states and thoughts arising and passing, arising and passing. We start to see there's really nowhere solid in ourselves where we can take a stand. Nothing firm.

Now, you may have heard that the aim in doing meditation practice is to destroy the ego.

This is one of the common buzzwords that floats around when you talk about meditation practice: "I'm going to get in there and really destroy that ego."

There's a writer who goes under the name Wei Wu Wei who had something illuminating to say about this. Wei Wu Wei is a beautiful Chinese name composed of three characters. The first is wei, which means "do" or "act." The second is wu, which means "not." And the third is wei again, which means "do." So his name literally translates as "do, not do"—pointing to a way of acting without motive, acting without trying to act. He's indicating a way of living in the world based on pure spontaneity: wei wu wei, act without trying, act without acting.

Never mind that he's actually an English writer whose real name is Terence Gray. It's a brilliant pen name,

and he publishes his books through Hong Kong University Press, so he rather gets away with it.

Here's what Wei Wu Wei had to say about destroying the ego: "Hound the ego and cook its goose—all well and good. But first you have to catch it. And that's the problem, because no such thing exists."

How can you destroy an ego when there isn't one? What he means, of course, is there isn't an ego as a solid entity. You can never destroy your ego because you'll never find one as a solid thing.

If we look more closely, we discover that what constitutes the ego is simply a quality of holding. It's only the holding in our mind that gives any sense of solidity to self. And we hold in so many different ways.

We hold to the past—to memories, to experiences. We hold to the future—to ideas of what I will do, what I want to do, what my plans are. We hold to people: our parents, lovers, friends, sons and daughters. We hold to views: "I know what life is about. I have my philosophy. I have my opinions." We hold to our self-image: "I'm this sort of person. I'm not that sort of person." We hold in many, many ways.

In all these different areas of holding—that's all that creates this sense of "I." That's all there is to it.

If you want to discover where your sense of "I" is located, if you want to find out what you're holding on to, simply look at what's in your thoughts in the middle of a sitting. Here we are, just sitting in the middle of a summer afternoon—well, sort of a summer afternoon in England—in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing. Why should there be anything going on at all? Why should there be anything there at all?

Whatever is there exists as a result of our holding. The key to seeing where our holding lies is simply looking at our own thoughts. What thoughts fill our head? Especially, what thoughts recur? What thoughts come again and again? That's what we're trying to stand on. That's where we're trying to make our stand.

As we begin to see this insubstantial quality of self, we can start to let go of some of these unnecessary movements of mind. We start to realize it really doesn't matter in the middle of a sitting whether I think about that beach I was on in Spain a year ago or not. It really doesn't matter if I think about the job I'm going to take up the month after I leave this retreat. It really doesn't matter whether those thoughts come into my mind or not.

And as we start to invest less in all that structure of past and future, we come upon a new element in our meditation practice, a new element in the experience, and that is the quality of space.

This, again, is an important discovery. We come upon the actual experience of spaciousness in the mind. In fact, the more we let go of these concerns of the self, the more we're willing to let go of our hopes and fears and worries and doubts and likes and dislikes, the more they're replaced by nothing. Nothing takes their place. And so we come to sit and we find there's nothing happening. There's nothing going on. There's nothing here.

Now this can also be a disquieting experience. You've heard probably many times that what we're really

all about in developing our meditation practice is coming upon peace. The Buddha said there is no higher happiness than peace. And yet the first time that most of us begin to taste some peace in our practice, we go, "What? Not this." Because it's not comfortable at first. It's scary. Peace is supposed to—you know, little white doves are supposed to fly through and flowers rain down upon you. It's not supposed to be this vacancy, is it?

Because in that kind of space, there's nothing to support the ego. There's no support for self in that. And we've always, throughout our life, we've looked for something that gave support to I, to me. So it takes some adapting to appreciate the quality of peace, to appreciate this quality of space. It's not something that comes naturally for us. But we just have to keep going into that state again and again for it to start feeling more comfortable. For us to realize that we don't have to fill that space with I, with me, with self. And there's actually nothing threatening at all in it. How could there be? How can there be anything threatening in nothing?

So it's just really a matter of becoming comfortable with that spaciousness, with that emptiness. And then it leads into another phase of the meditation, which is the development of this quality of expansiveness.

With this quality of expansiveness, the first thing we notice is a widening of the awareness, a widening of the attention. So in the meditation particularly, you start to realize that there are other people in the room. There are sounds going on outside. We can spend hour after hour so absorbed in our own thoughts and feelings and body sensations that we forget that we're in the middle of a room with twenty-five other people, that there are still things happening outside, that there's life beyond the meditation room door.

So we start, once we come upon this quality of spaciousness, naturally the consciousness starts to widen, starts to broaden. And we realize something that Freud talked about. He mentioned that when a child is very young, as an infant, it has what he called an oceanic sense of self. The baby doesn't have any boundaries to its sense of self. Its consciousness is limitless.

We start to realize that over the years of our growing up, we've retreated, we've shrunk down that original infinite consciousness to become smaller and smaller and smaller until it's just focused on this body and this mind. And what has caused that shrinking of consciousness has been self-concern, has been the repeated movements of the ego, wanting this, not wanting that. It's this preoccupation with self that causes consciousness to shrink down until it focuses on such a small corner of its whole extent.

As we start giving up some of these forms of self-concern, consciousness starts to return to its broader, original basis. And we find then that we're able to take in more of the universe with a balanced state of mind. We can be with more things. We can be open to people. We can hear the sounds, see the background sight, can listen to a person without the mind being swayed by any of it. There's steadiness in it.

There's a nice little story about Krishnamurti that illustrates this quality. It was related to me by someone

who used to teach at his school in Hampshire called Brockwood Park. A woman was getting very angry with Krishnamurti. They were standing outside near the vegetable garden of the school, and she was really letting rip at him. She was getting angry with him at the top of her voice.

For minute after minute, I don't know the content of what she was saying, but she was being very vocal and abusive with him. She kept on talking for some time, and then she started to calm down, and he replied. They had a little bit of a discussion, and then that dialogue ended.

As soon as it ended, he said, "Quick, come over here." He took her over to a bush that was growing against a wall and said, "I think there's a bird's nest in here." They looked behind the bush, and sure enough there was a little nest with three little eggs in it.

She said, "How on earth did you know that?"

He said, "Well, while you were talking to me, I noticed that there was a little gray sparrow that flew into that bush three different times. Two of the times he had little pieces of feathers in his mouth, which I thought he was probably using to pad the nest."

That's a spacious mind.

Someone said about expansive consciousness that events don't cause the same kind of disturbance in an expansive awareness. It's like the difference between putting a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water and putting the same teaspoon of salt into a lake. When you put a teaspoon of salt into a glass and stir it up, the water tastes very strongly of salt. When you put that same teaspoon into a lake, you can't even tell it's there.

Similarly, an expansive awareness that holds anger—you can hardly taste its presence. But when consciousness is very narrow, when it's tight and confined, and anger comes into it, it feels like it could explode under that influence.

This expansive awareness allows us to accommodate both the inner and outer changes of life without being so shaken by them, without being so disturbed. This lends greatly to the accommodating quality of mind. As we become more grounded in this sense of spaciousness, we're less influenced by the changes that life presents, by the different pleasures and pains that come our way. This brings a degree of steadiness and equanimity into living.

Another very valuable thing about this expansiveness is that as consciousness broadens out, what we took to be our self is relatively smaller. This mind and this body are relatively less of the whole of consciousness. This means that, in a way, the sense of self is getting weaker, getting smaller. As you develop this quality of expansiveness, at times this sense of self may slip away entirely. If it does, it's a very useful time because understanding and insight can come from such an experience of not having this burden of self.

There's one thing you can be sure of if an experience like this comes your way, and that is that in fairly short order, the self will return. Not to harbor any illusions on that score.

There's a nice story from the Zen tradition that illustrates this. There was a Chinese monk who had been practicing Zen all of his life. He'd been in the monastery for about forty years, and he was now getting old. He hadn't come upon the freedom that his teacher spoke about and obviously manifested. He hadn't come upon that discovery and he was getting discouraged.

"I've tried so hard for all my grown life. I haven't found it. It's just not going to happen for me this lifetime." So he decided to leave the monastery. He gave up, basically. He left the monastery and started to walk up by himself into the mountains behind.

At this time, a bodhisattva, one of these mythical beings in the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, became aware of his plight and decided to manifest himself to see if he could work with the old monk. This happened to be the Bodhisattva Manjushri, a bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom. He manifested himself in the form of an old man who was walking down the mountainside with a heavy load of firewood on his back. The old man was bent double under the weight of this firewood and was walking down the hillside with great difficulty, pain at each step.

This old monk was coming up the path and saw this man. He just exchanged a short glance with him and thought, "There's something different about this man. This person knows." He just saw it in his eyes.

So he stopped and said, "What is it then?"

Manjushri, in the form of the old man, shrugged off the bundle of firewood that was on his back. He stood up straight and tall like a young man, like a man in his twenties. At that moment the monk saw. He had that insight that brought him the freedom, the understanding that he was looking for. He saw what it was to live without the weight, the burden of self, which is what Manjushri was trying to teach him. He got it.

And so at that moment he said, "Oh, and then what?"

And at that point Manjushri reached down, picked up the firewood, put it back on his back, bent double under the weight and walked off slowly down the hill again, taking up again the burden of self, but no longer believing in it—no longer feeling that it's solid, that it's a solid entity. Because when we have the mind of expansiveness, we see the self in a new light.

And with this expansive awareness you may come upon a different kind of experience, a different quality than you might have thought was possible. For instance, it's possible in developing this expansive awareness to feel a great sense of calm. Because with this widening of consciousness one taps into just the underlying stillness of existence.

At the same time, the mind can keep moving. Desires can arise, fears, likes, dislikes, and so forth. So there can be at the same time a sense of great calm from the expansiveness and a sense of agitation from the

fact that the emotions are still alive and working. So this is an unusual thing. I wasn't quite prepared for it when I first came upon it. I didn't know that you could be both calm and agitated at the same time. So it threw me for a minute.

Now, if this comes about, one has a choice. One can stay with the calmness in its breadth or one can focus on the agitation. And I'd say what is most helpful at these times is to stay with the calmness. Keep the focus open and wide with that underlying sense of stillness and just let the agitation exist within that.

Because what has happened in the past is that time and time again, though we may have felt a moment of peace, the self has arisen and called out. It calls out with its worries, with its fears, with its hopes, with its wants, with its dislikes. And every time it's called, we've come running. Like an attentive mother who's attending to her fragile baby, we've answered to the ego's cries with our care and attention. And what that has done is to reinforce that sense of need, of wanting, of fearing, and so forth.

Seeing the ego's call from this point of expansiveness, we can develop a new relationship to it. We can let the cries be there, but we don't have to take them so seriously. Because we start to see that it's not a matter of life and death—these wants and hopes and fears, past and future and so forth. We don't have to respond with agitation, with more self-concern to these cries.

And it's as though the ego and all of its movements, seen in this context of expansiveness, are like one tiny whirlpool on a whole ocean of life. There's the whole ocean of existence, vast and infinite. And all we've gotten concerned about, ninety-nine percent of the time, is this one tiny whirlpool in this one small corner of the ocean of wanting.

When we start to see it in this way, we can see the ego's needs and its wants with a quality of dispassion. We no longer feel passionately about them. We're no longer compelled to respond, to answer them. Nor do we have to change them. And this is the beauty of this kind of seeing. We don't have to make every form of desire or fear or anger go away. We just have to see it in perspective and to see it for what it is. And then we're no longer bound by it. We can accommodate those movements of mind while still being grounded in an overall sense of expansiveness and calm and peace.

This movement begins in meditation with being completely enwrapped in this web of personality that we've woven through our wanting—the center that we've put together through our will and our volition and our thoughts. Moving away from that exclusive emphasis on self-concern to seeing that movement in the context of the whole of existence, so that our life truly becomes grounded in a broader perspective on life. It's one of the major transformations in any real spiritual path.

May all beings see into the nature of self. May all beings come upon spaciousness. May all beings live with an expansive awareness.

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