

Basics for Insight Meditation 01

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 42:45

So this is just an opportunity really to just revise the principles of our meditation, why do we do it and how do we do it. I'm aware that there are people in the hall that haven't heard anything about this or very little, and also that people have been at it longer than me, so I'll try and get a balance to what we say.

The Buddha himself, remember, began in a position that we are in, searching for happiness. That's basically what we're trying to do. We're trying to be happy, for heaven's sake. And at the time when he finally broke through what he called the delusion, the basic ignorance that we live under, he was able to point to three ways in which we can investigate our experience and to correct the way we are looking at things. You could say that our basic problem is one of relationship. He talked about them as the three characteristics of existence.

So in the meditation practice, the first thing is to really begin to get close to this idea of impermanence and what that actually means in terms of a direct experience. It's not as though that comes as a great shock to anybody that things arise and pass away. It's not as though, generally speaking, people are not aware that the seasons do change. But it's really turning that inward towards ourselves and to recognise that we are in a process of change, and that the change is not simply something that's changing shape like you might take a piece of clay, turn it into a saucer, screw it up and then turn it into a cup. It's actually radical. Things are dying and passing away, and the great exemplar of that, of course, is our own bodies.

Every cell is arising, dying and passing away. We don't experience that, at least I haven't. I haven't experienced the death of a cell. But I'm quite aware that in fact cells are arising and passing away. And it's that ability to really go into ourselves and see that all the experience that we're having is in this process of coming into being and then passing out, and that the mind with its conceptual ability draws us into an idea of continuity. So there is this feeling in me that I've always been me since the day I was born. My body changes but not me. I mean, my thoughts have changed. I don't think like a three-year-old anymore. But I haven't changed. I don't have the same emotions as a child, but I haven't changed. There's always this feeling that there's a me inside all this, which isn't changing. It's absolutely steady. And somehow I anchor myself to that.

When I actually investigate it, and I begin to describe what this me is, what do I end up experiencing? So I'm turning into myself, and I observe that everything I'm experiencing is passing away. But I still have this sense of me, the observer. Somehow I've retreated out of the body, out of the emotions, out of the mind, and I've found this other place within myself that I experience as the feeler or the experiencer or the knower, and sometimes it's very strong that oh, this is me, I'm the one who knows. Now from that

position we're quite privileged because we can at least abstract ourselves from these other identities that we've had. So we've had the identity of the body.

Now these days it's very difficult to go back to that very early childhood state where you are the body, but we do occasionally get that. For instance, when was the last time you trapped your finger in a door? For that one moment you are the body. It's like a wonderful complete moment of pain. There is only pain. Then, of course, you shoot out of it and suddenly there's somebody feeling the pain. There's an objectivity comes to it. But at least there we can grasp what it is to be a self that is just the body, as a baby is supposed to be. I can't remember, you see.

Then there's the emotional self, which is much easier to get lost into. Suddenly I am angry. There's no separation. I just blow it, bang the doors and all that. Or I panic and I just become that fear. Or I'm depressed. I associate with, I identify with in a total way that this is me. Occasionally I'm happy, which is wonderful. And being happy, being joyful, you then of course get that sense of loss when it disappears.

But there's this self which attaches itself to an emotion, which defines itself as I am happy. I and happiness are the same. I and anger are the same. But here in meditation what we discover is that there is anger, there is depression, there is happiness. Somehow I've detached from it. Now this word detachment, that's what you'll get in the literature. It gives it a certain coldness. Another word that you might find used is non-attachment, which gives it a sense of not just wanting to push away or a coldness to it. It's just there's a sense of separateness from the emotion that you're feeling.

And then with thoughts, these are even more difficult as we discover in our meditation. Suddenly I'm thinking. There's no objectivity to it. I'm just lost in a dream sequence. I'm just lost in a whole flow of thoughts. And suddenly I come out of it by which time I can only note what has actually happened. I can't note it while it's happening because I'm lost in it. And in that moment I've become the intellectual self, the thinking self.

So we're constantly moving from these definitions of a self. And in meditation, we're finding this other place, which one writer happily called the observation post. I'm trying to think of the name of the book now. It's *Nyanaponika. The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. It still remains a classic, that book. And we're finding this other place within ourselves from which we can observe these things and we're observing that they're arising and passing away. But in so doing we've also found a space, there's also a space between, a sense of distance from what we're actually experiencing within ourselves.

And that sense of space is the not-self, not me, not mine. So often you get this confusion in the teaching where we think the Buddha is making some metaphysical statement, there is no self, there is no body. But when you look at his actual teaching in the scriptures, it's just a way of beginning to realise what or who or whatever it is that we really are, and we're doing it by pushing away, by making an object of everything within us. Now as soon as something becomes an object, it obviously can't be the subject.

When I look at my hand, I'm still attached to it. But that objectivity means that it can't be me. It can't be that which knows. And I'm taking that objectivity into myself so that when I feel an emotion, I'm feeling it, I'm looking at it, I'm experiencing it. And there's that separation. Every time I separate from something, I'm disidentifying. I'm relocating. I'm relocating where I think I am.

So I've got to relocate out of the body, relocate out of the sensations, feelings, emotions, relocate out of thought. If I were going for this election next year, I'd be saying, relocate, relocate, relocate. So this constant relocation, I'm finding another place in which I can find, shall we say, a different identity. And this identity I experience as being the observer, the feeler. It's a very strange place to be because here I know what's happening. I feel an emotion. I can feel it. I can feel a sensation. I can know it. And yet somehow I'm not it.

Now that's all the Buddha's pointing to when he's saying, not me, not mine. This is not me, not mine. And the fact that it arises and passes away is also pointing out it can't be me or mine because one minute it's here and then it's gone. How could it be me? The idea of a me is something permanent, substantial, something that doesn't change. So the first position that we take in our meditation is that observer, that feeler. We lift ourselves out of the body-mind complex in order to discover this observation post.

All the noting we do, all the techniques that you come across in *Vipassanā*, and the technique I myself am teaching is known as the Mahāsi technique, but there are many others. And if you go into Zen, or you go to Dzogchen, the Tibetan tradition, all these techniques are always trying to get the meditator to find this position, that's all. And from this position, you can get this objectivity. And these three characteristics, we've mentioned the two at the moment, this idea of impermanence and the fact that it's not me, not mine, becomes more and more apparent the more you practice it.

Now, even though we get to this position of the observer, the knower, that's not your final position because there's still something there that knows itself. Now, if I have a sense of presence, this is me, it's also an object, so I can't be that either. Everything that I'm aware of can't be the awareness that's aware of it. So even at that point, which we can get to by an act of will, we can put ourselves into the observation post, is not the end point. The end point is even when that sense of self disappears.

And occasionally that may happen to you in little bits when you fall into an absorption, an absorption state where there's a sense of loss of a self and yet when you come out of that state you know that there has been a process of knowing, a process of seeing, a process of experience. These I like to call little Nibbānic moments. Even whether they're actually Nibbānic or not, let's not get into that discussion. But they're Nibbānic moments in the sense that just for that one moment, we've lost the sense of self.

Now, you might say to yourself, well, I do that when I watch a good film. When you sit and watch a good film, that's it, you're gone. You wake up two hours later and you say, that was a fantastic film. But you weren't aware of yourself watching the film while you were watching the film. There was a loss of self. But unfortunately, we enter into those absorptions with an intention which corrupts the actual process.

And the intention is, I, me, I'm going to enjoy myself. And as soon as you do that, you form a relationship with films. The film now becomes something that your happiness is dependent on. So after you've seen one film, there comes, in not too long a space afterwards, a thirst, a craving, an addiction to get another DVD. Or else life becomes meaningless. This is what I found.

So it's a case of recognising that we're talking about two different levels of consciousness. There's a level of knowing, a level of the way we relate to the world, which is seeking happiness in the world. Now, this is where we come to the other of the three characteristics, which the Buddha called *dukkha*. *Dukkha* translates as a hard place. So we're in a hard place and it's a hard place because we've made this wrong relationship. And this fundamental delusion that we suffer from expresses itself in a search for happiness in the sensual world. That's how it expresses itself.

Having identified ourselves with the body, having identified ourselves with our emotional life and our thought life, we're now trying to make this inner environment the happiness that we seek. That's all. So when I'm feeling well, when I'm feeling really fit and I'm walking up a hill or something, then that's happiness. I've made it, finally. Then I get to the top of the hill and I've got to come down, and it all dribbles away. The body feels weak and tired, and I've got to have my orange juice.

Emotionally speaking, I can create a situation. I try and find the right person who makes me happy, the right situation. And I find myself in this beautiful emotional euphoria. Nature, sex, drugs, rock and roll, it's wonderful. But unfortunately, as soon as I've got it, this emotion corrupts it, disappears it, falls away from me. But I still think that as long as I can just get the right thing, right job, right relationship, right house, right car, I will be definitely perfectly happy.

So this search for happiness in the world is producing that stress that we are suffering. Because we constantly want to be happy in a world which cannot deliver, if only because it passes away. Now, to let go of that is the process of renunciation. To begin to let go of that as a place to find happiness is the process of renunciation. Now, renunciation isn't self-mortification in the sense that we're not trying to beat ourselves up. For heaven's sake, we're suffering enough. What we're trying to do is to let go of our attachment to things. And we do that by, through this meditation, beginning to realise what desire is.

So the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, he begins with a very simple statement. Life is *dukkha*, it's a hard place. And the reason it's a hard place, he says, is because of a certain type of desire. It's a desire based on seeking happiness in the sensual world. And then he says, if you can get rid of that, you will actually come to the end of this *dukkha*. You'll actually come to a position in yourself where there is no more unsatisfactoriness, no more suffering, and you live, in his words, contented and with it happy.

When somebody complains to him and says, look, this training is very difficult, he says, well, it is difficult, but then people achieve this wonderful state, *Nibbāna*. And the guy says, *Nibbāna*, so what? So he's very serious. When you get there, he says, you are contented and with it happy. He's describing himself.

So remember that the enlightenment or the liberation is not a destruction of what we have, but a refinement of what we have. When the Buddha is finally liberated, he doesn't turn into this amorphous blob, sitting under a tree with enlightenment, glowing but unable to speak, like he's lost in the Nibbānic bliss forever. He gets up, he walks, he talks, he relates. And the Buddha's heart is these immeasurables, which we'll practice this afternoon: love, compassion, joy and peace. That's his heart.

And his intellect, what had been such a barrier to actually seeing things the way they are, and that's why remember in our meditation we're constantly dragging ourselves down into the body to get back to basic experience away from conceptual thinking. Remember that concepts always hold our history. So whenever we experience something, we're always dumping our history on what we're experiencing. That's why whenever you eat an apple, it's always compared with the last apple or the apples you ate. And it's either rubbish or brilliant or whatever. But actually, the apple is just an apple. And to taste the apple, this apple, this apple that I'm tasting, in its individuality, I have to forget all history. And to do that, I place my attention just in the eating, just on the tongue.

So now, this liberation, when it came, did not take away his intellect. He used his intellect to express the Dharma, to express his teaching. So everything that we're doing is not an annihilation of anything. In fact, he says the only things that are annihilated are greed, hatred, and this fundamental delusion. Everything is returned to us in a purified form.

So this *dukkha*, this unhappiness, this unsatisfactoriness, meaninglessness that might come about our lives, is all resting on this delusion that somehow we can find the happiness in this human form. And we make the mistake of thinking we are human beings. But all we mean by human being is a conventional coming together of carrots and apples, isn't it? And then thoughts and images. When you get it all together and it's all working properly, we call that human being. But when you take it apart, what is there? But it's just a combination of objects, which the Buddha calls aggregates. He calls them the five aggregates, the physical aggregates, the perceptual aggregates, the feeling aggregates, all the aggregates that we call our emotions and thoughts, and these acts of cognition, these acts of consciousness.

And our process is to begin to see that all that actually is, as it says in the scriptures, just bubbles in a stream, just like a flame which is constantly changing, just burning fuel, but in a constant process of change. But the flame looks one, it looks whole, it looks entire, but actually it's just made of a constant flow of energy.

So these three characteristics are what it is we're trying to experience directly. And to directly experience these three characteristics is to liberate us from this essential delusion.

Now, you might think, therefore, that having been liberated from that, you just end up in a sense of annihilation, like there's nothing left. But the Buddha points out, keeps stressing the fact, that he's not teaching annihilation. He's actually teaching that there is an experience which is beyond the phenomenal experience of ordinary daily life. And he points to that by calling himself the *Tathāgata*. And the *Tathāgata*

translates best as the one who's transcended. The one who is transcended.

So every time we move into the position of the observer within ourselves, we're transcending the body. We're transcending emotion. We're transcending thought. We're finding a very different position within ourselves. And when occasionally in your meditation there is that loss of self, there is that absorption into what we're observing, and with the loss of self you'll lose a sense of time, we're catching just moments of *Nibbānic* bliss. And the problem with that for us, because we associate bliss and happiness with emotions, is that there are no emotions there.

So when Sāriputta is asked, you talk about the bliss, the happiness of emotions, but there are no emotions in *Nibbāna*. He says, yes, he says. It's the very absence of emotions which is the bliss in *Nibbāna*. So there's a real conundrum for us.

So, as in your meditation, when you can stabilise at some point this observer within you, when you can stabilise that position of just being within the phenomena of your own body, heart and mind, feelings, emotions, images, when you can stabilise that position long enough, for those of you who work at it, ask yourself, what is the mood, the emotion, of the one who's observing? What is the mood of it, right? Just reflect on that for a moment. And that will draw you more and more to want to be in that place because that's where the peacefulness resides. It doesn't reside in the emotional life, it doesn't reside in the intellect or the body.

Now, having done that, you might think to yourself, well, are you therefore denying the body, heart and mind? No, not at all. Because then, as it were, from that insight, you have to re-enter the whole psychophysical process. So the Buddha talks about right understanding, but then you have to draw yourself with right intention into the heart. And that right intention moves outwards into relationship, which is right speech, right action, right livelihood. And that mirrors back to you your wisdom or probably the lack of it and that's how you gain, that's how you begin to understand that oh yes in sitting yes I consider those lovely and impermanent you know I can feel pain in my knee and I'm perfectly equanimous with that, that's absolutely wonderful you see. And then you're waiting for the tube and somebody stands on your foot.

To hell with meditation.

So that's what we're trying to do in this, through the process of insight meditation, *vipassanā*, right? We're trying to see these three characteristics more and more clearly. And it's in the seeing that the liberation comes. When you see something, then it rebounds back upon your attitude. You know, why do I want to keep doing this if it's making me unhappy? Right? It's very simple. So the seeing is the first point. It then moves, as I say, into right attitude. And this we develop through the practice of *mettā*, loving-kindness.

Now, those three characteristics, the characteristic of impermanence, the characteristic of how we create suffering for ourselves, the process, the role of sensual desire, and this teaching about not me, not mine,

that's what we're trying to see. Now, what stops us seeing that are what the Buddha called these hindrances. And these hindrances you can split basically into two types. There's those types that excite the mind and keep it busy and take you away from this observing. And there's those types that drop you into the black hole. Dullness and lethargy, given a moral twist by calling it sloth and laziness and all that.

So as these mental states grab you right, the meditator has to know well this is what it is and this is what I have to do to counteract it right. And one thing that I think has been quite confusing to some people from some of the emails I get is that when something comes up which drags you away, so for instance some planning, you're planning a new business or something, so you're planning to go on holiday and there's an excitement comes when you're planning, planning, you see right. You come into the body, this is why it's so important, you come into the body and you get in contact with the excitement and you're allowing the excitement to express itself right, express itself and to burn away.

When you have a depressive thought and you're feeling depressed and the mind goes off about, you know, the world's in a terrible state, we're all doomed, and I'm horrible, and all that stuff. You see, you come off the thought, you come into the body, and you contact the feeling of depression, and you go into it, you feel it. You're allowing the heart to express itself.

If you find yourself arguing and you're getting very angry about something, you see, and you're strangling them. Then you say, oh, stop the anger, anger. You come back into the body. You find where, if you can, you can find where the anger is expressing itself. And you bury your attention into the heat. So you're not pushing anything away. You're not trying to run away from anything.

Pushing away, running away are the usual way we suppress stuff. When something comes up we don't like, we either push it away with aversion, don't want to see it, or we run away from it, we turn away, we ignore it. All that produces psychological problems for us. Here we're not doing that. Here, when something comes up, we come off the mind and we bury ourselves in the emotional state and we give it the time to burn out. Some stuff takes a long time. You can expect to see true improvement over a period of something like twenty-five years. I don't want to give the impression that this happens overnight.

What you're beginning to realise is that the emotional states that we've created have not been caused by the obvious object. So when somebody has annoyed us, when somebody has annoyed us, they've not caused the anger. It's really important. What's happened is we ourselves have come from a position of this. This person has disturbed this position and we've reacted from inside towards them with anger. The anger is caused by us. So therefore, seeking happiness by destroying the other is not going to help. You can annihilate everybody else in the world and you'll still end up angry and lonely. It doesn't... because they haven't actually caused the problem. The problem lies within our own hearts, which remember is always trying to seek happiness in the sensual world.

Nobody has frightened us. Fear has arisen because of something in me has reacted to a situation. Nobody can cause us psychological pain. It's all been caused inwardly by ourselves. It's really difficult, if you're

new to this, to really grasp that. And don't worry about it if you disagree. Nobody can cause us psychological pain. Now, the disappointment in that is that you can no longer blame somebody else. This is a real disappointment, because up until now it was great. Society, my parents, the dog, they were all to blame. But now, it's just you. But the liberation is that if I cause this, if I cause these awful mental states that I have to bear, I must be able to undo them. And that's where the liberation comes, that we are actually, we can become in charge of our own psychic life, our own psychological life.

Now, given these hindrances when they come, so we've talked about the negative stuff, well, there's been a bit of excitement there. So there's excitement, there's depression, there's lust, there's romance, there's all the beautiful stuff too, I don't forget about that. And then there's all this other stuff, the anxiety, the depression, etc. All that, you see, has been caused by me.

Now, what can I do about something which is already conditioned? If I try to destroy it, all I do is push it down. If I push it away like this and not want to see it, we know from our own psychology, that it just makes more and more psychic problems for us. If I turn away from it, I know that it's just there within the psyche waiting for its little moment to appear. So what can I do? Hmm?

The answer, of course, is to bear it. We have to suffer the consequences of our past unwholesome actions. And that's exactly what we're doing when we sit in meditation. We're allowing this stuff to arise and burn away. That's all. That's all we have to do, is to have the courage, the fortitude, the resilience to stay with the mental states and to allow them to rise and pass away. But to stay with them as felt sensations.

As soon as they slip into the mind, as soon as we allow that moment of unmindfulness to come, and it slips into the mind as a dream, as a film, as a process, unwittingly we're developing the very same state. Because that's how the emotions develop themselves. Consider. You know in the morning somebody said something a little bit off and you've just dismissed it. That's the way they are. And then tea time comes, eleven o'clock something, and you get a cup of tea. Bloody say that to me. And then at lunch it's raving. By the time you get home you don't want to see them in case you kill them. And all that's been created by us, by me. They only insulted me once, but I've had them insult me thousands of times before I go to bed.

So, it's recognising the role of the mind in developing our mental states that needs to be really perceived. And this business of, in meditation, of noting what's happening and coming back into the body, that's not just meditation. We have to do that throughout our lives, from the moment we wake up to the moment we fall asleep. Every time you see your mind wandering during the day, there has to be that effort to stop, note it, come into the body, allow the emotion to dissipate a bit.

So all that I'm describing here is how to generally attack four of these hindrances, those to do with happiness and pleasures and all that, those to do with angers, depressions, all the negative stuff about life, those to do with just general restlessness, where the mind is just busy all the time or there's a feeling of restlessness in the body, just to relax into it and feel it and just allow it to expend its energy. And doubt.

Doubt here is sceptical doubt. The Buddha wants us to be in a state of wonder. He wants us to actually doubt his word in that very positive way of saying to ourselves, now, is this true or not? Because it's an investigation. It's the investigation that draws us to liberation. It's no good believing in the Buddha and what he said. That's not going to, I mean, it's not going to help at all. Faith is something different. It's confidence. And the confidence is there to make it easy for us to investigate the teachings. And sceptical doubt is something else. Sceptical doubt is always based on fear. It's fear of commitment, isn't it? An aversion to commitment. You don't want to go there.

And when sceptical doubt enters into our ordinary lives, it can be absolutely crippling. Because you can't, is this the job I should be doing? Is it not? Should I do it? Should I not? And the job goes. Is this the person I really love? Should I love? Should I be married? Should I not? Before they've gone off, they've gone off to somebody else. So sceptical doubt is a real undermining thing. And in your meditation, really, if that comes up, you know, everybody else can do it, I can't do it, I'm no good. Really come off the thought, come off the thought, go into the feeling of that doubt and let it express itself, the fear, whatever.

The final one is the business of dullness and lethargy. And it's a big hindrance. I mean, you know, falling asleep in our meditation all the time. And of course, when you look back into the way we've used sleep to escape problems. You know, every time we feel a bit depressed, well, you just, you know, it's like head for the bed, you know. Big neon lights, head for the bed. Or you just lie down on the couch, fed up, and off you go. Great, isn't it? I mean, oblivion, there's no suffering. And then you wake up, which is unfortunate. But if you would say completely oblivious, see, I mean, if death is complete annihilation, what's the problem? So unfortunately, we keep waking up out of this.

But what we're doing is we're creating that inner habit of falling asleep. And it comes up as these feelings of heaviness, sloth, torpor, etc. And there's also, of course, the fact that being in that gentle subliminal state on a Sunday morning is really nice, isn't it? You know when you wake up and you turn over and you're just wandering in that pleasant dreamy state or get back into bed and you just keep wandering in that lovely subliminal state of not being quite asleep and not being quite awake. And developing that is developing sloth and torpor, dullness and lethargy. So we shouldn't be surprised when we come to sit that we're always bobbing up and down, falling asleep.

So all these things that we're experiencing here in our meditation in terms of these negative mental states, we have to bring that practice into our daily life. Every time you feel sleepy during the day, ask yourself, now is this real tiredness? Or is it just this dullness and lethargy? In which case, stay awake. Every time you see your mind wandering, you have to note it and bring it back. So the practice of *vipassanā* is something that we have to take into just every daily life. And remember that the thing that really helps the process, the spiritual process, is to relax. So if you find your life too busy, try and do something to make it less busy. Try to experience this standing meditation that we did in the morning as a constant throughout the day, every so often just to stop.

It's a really powerful word, you see. Just stop. Stop. I think I've stopped too.

So, what we've described is these three characteristics which we're investigating, the sense of impermanence, the sense of not me, not mine, and the role of sensual desire, all based on some fundamental delusion within us that we're seeking happiness in the wrong place. And while we're doing that, these hindrances draw us away. Old habits of thought, old addictions, little hatreds, depressions, they're all drawing us away into this dream world. And all we have to do is to come off the dream, re-establish that awareness within the body and let these things express themselves as feeling. That's all, as feeling.

And when occasionally there does descend upon you some blissful peacefulness, see, be careful you don't sink into that as you would ice cream. Try to still maintain the fact of observing it as something which is very pleasant, very beautiful, but also impermanent. Don't get drawn into beautiful states of mind. And use it. Those are really good moments to really draw the attention into the breath and begin to experience impermanence and to develop that sense of laser beam concentration. Laser beams, stillness and attention.

And finally, just to bring an image to your mind of the child. So when somebody before the age of seven sees something they don't know, you see in a child, what do they do, you see? They become locked onto the object, don't they? Their eyes don't move. They're just locked onto the object, a beetle that they've never seen before. Everything goes absolutely still.

The body relaxes. The jaw relaxes. They look gormless. And the good parent gives them a clip on the back of their head. They look gormless. The jaw's completely relaxed, which means there's no thought. That's why in your meditation, always make sure your jaw's relaxed, your tongue's relaxed. And they're just watching.

And then after a moment or so, they stop and they ask, what is it? Now all that learning has gone on in just that watching. And all we're trying to do is get back to that state. Just that state of the original child. And that's why in Zen they'll often talk to you about original mind.

So if you keep that image in your mind as a child, and that's what you're trying to get back to, a non-thinking state of pure observation, and having the trust—it really depends upon faith—having the trust that there is within us a superb intelligence which will see the way things are and liberate itself. That intelligence is constantly saying, get that meditator out of the way. Will that meditator please go home and just let me look?

So that's your big problem. That's our big problem, is to get this meditator out of the way. And we do it in a very simple way. We just relax, we place the attention on the breath, we raise the interest to observe these three characteristics, and we just watch. We just feel. We just experience whatever draws the attention within the field of awareness. Voilà.

So, thank you very much. What we can do now is some walking meditation.

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