

## Gender transformed and meta-gendered enlightenment: Reading Buddhist narratives as paradigms of inclusiveness

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### Abstract

The analysis of the crossing of genders within Buddhist narratives as contrasted with Hindu evidence provides a fresh insight into the Asian paradigms for non-binary gender identities. The early monastic discipline (*vinaya*) relates the Buddha's non-judgemental and pragmatic approach to sex-change. The agent of causality (*karma*) prevails in Buddhism above the Hindu paradigm of the agency of divine intervention. The change of the Early Buddhist inclusive approach into the later multi-voiced and often exclusive viewpoints is exemplified and analysed. Especially the many and often contradictory Mahāyāna Buddhist voices highlight the diverse cultural adoption of Buddhism throughout Asia. This paper argues that Buddhist narratives can provide an empowering opportunity for a Modern Buddhist inclusive anthropology and spiritual 'metagenderism'.

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This paper addresses the question of gender identity and gender transformation within Buddhist narratives as contrasted with Hindu evidence. Anyone who aims to understand the Buddhist position on questions of same-sex sexualities and gender variance i.e. non-binary gender identities can't avoid scrutinising the Early Buddhist scriptures in their Indian context, before transferring the question into the modern Buddhist discourses.

The Buddha's paradigm as set in the Early monastic discipline and the Buddhist multi-voiced debate on gender equality provides a springboard for a Modern Buddhist inclusive anthropology and the spiritual state beyond gender polarities, which I propose to call 'metagenderism'.

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Let us start our investigation with a story found in the basket of discipline (*vinaya*) of the Pāli canon.<sup>1</sup> The Pāli canon of the Theravāda tradition is canonical for Buddhists in Sri Lanka and South East Asia (=Southern Buddhism) and the only canon completely surviving in an Indian language (as opposed to the fragmentary survival of Sanskrit and Prakrit canons of other Buddhist schools or translations into e.g. Chinese and Tibetan).

Here, in the Suttavibhaṅga – the first section of the *vinaya* – we find significant discussion on offences meriting expulsion from the order (*pārājika*). All kinds of breaches of celibacy are discussed; the discussion is prompted – as stated explicitly - by real cases, including curiosities such as training a female monkey for sexual pleasure (I leave open here the possibility that this indeed does not refer to actual bestiality but is a humorous insertion which plays ironically with the over-systematisation found in the *vinaya*).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly enough, we read here also about a change of sex, although the connection with breaches of celibacy is not immediately obvious:

‘Now at one time, the sign of a woman [*itthilinga*] appeared to a monk. They [the other monks] told this matter to the lord. He said: “Monks, I allow a teacher [*upajjha*, preceptor, spiritual teacher] to meet with nuns during the rains, as for the upasampadā ordination [higher ordination], so as in the presence of the nuns away from those offences which they have in common with monks; but in those offences of monks which are offences not in common with nuns, there is no offence (for the nuns).’

‘Now at one time, the sign of a man [*purisalinga*] appeared to a nun. They [the other monks] told this matter to the lord. He said: “Monks, I allow a teacher to meet with the monks during the rains, as for the upasampadā ordination, so as in the presence of monks to turn the monks away from those offences which they have in common with nuns; but in those offences of nuns which are offences not in common with monks, there is no offence (for the monks).’ (Vin. iii 35 PTS)<sup>3</sup>

1 Cp. also P. HARVEY, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 412.

2 Cp. also B. FAURE, *The Red Thread*, p. 79.

3 I. B. HORNER (tr.), *Book of the Discipline*, vol. i, p. 54. Tena kho pana samayena aññatarassa bhikkhuno itthilingam pātubhūtam hoti. Bhagavato etamattam ārocesum. “Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, tamyeva upajjham tameva upasampadam tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhunīhi sangamitum. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnam bhikkhunīhi sādharānā tā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnam santike vutthātum. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnam bhikkhunīhi asādharānā tāhi

The gist of this narrative might not be too clear in the earlier translation of Ms. Horner, Pali Text Society (1938), which I just quoted. Let us try a more accurate reading of the crucial point in this obscure Pāli passage:

The Buddha answers in the case of the male to female (MtF) transformation: *Monks, I allow [her] a preceptor, I allow her the ordination, I allow her the ordination years [or: the monsoon periods, pointing either towards prestige or the general permission to stay with other nuns during this period] and the presence of nuns...*

The Buddha's laconic and pragmatic reaction towards sex/gender-crossing within the *saṅgha* (the Buddhist community) is striking. The bottom line is, the Buddha changed the status of the transsexual from Monk to Nun, with all implications for the keeping of the specific precepts of the other sex but with no consequences for the continuity of spiritual guidance (preceptor) and prestige (years of ordination). The female to male (FtM) is treated analogously.

The context of the passage in the discussion of offences clarifies the focus on the ethical implication of a sex-change for the community, in which sex specific precepts had to be kept and in which cross-sex contact was extremely limited and sanctioned.

By defining the transformed as a full member of the sex changed into, the Buddha clarifies the monastic-disciplinary implications. Interestingly enough, the text doesn't give any account how the 'mark of the opposite sex' appeared in the person in question. That it happens is accepted as common fact. This is also demonstrated by the enumeration of MtF and FtM transformations in the para-canonical *Milindapañhā* (267) within the regular phenomena appearing in the world.<sup>4</sup>

So, we find here a laconic, basically non-judgemental reaction of the Buddha, which can provide a valuable paradigm when applied within modern gender discourses towards transsexuality / transgenderism. However, this initial pragmatism approach towards gender-

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āpattihi anāpatti"ti. Tena kho pana samayena aññatarissā bhikkhuniyā purisalingam pātubhūtam hoti. Bhagavato etamattham ārocesum. "Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, tanyeva upajjham tameva upasampadam tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhūhi sangamitum. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnam bhikkhūhi sādharānā tā āpattiyo bhikkhūnam santike vutthātum. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnam bhikkhūhi asādharānā tāhi āpattihi anāpatti"ti.

4 *Dilemmas*, division 7, point 4 "What there is Nothing of in the World"; I. B. HORNER (tr.), *Milinda's questions*, vol. ii, p. 84: "Buddhas are seen in the world, buddhas by and for themselves [pratyekabuddhas] ... disciples of Tathāgatas... wheel-turning kings ... regional kings ... gods [devas] and mankind [humans] ... wealthy people ... poor people ... ones going well ... one going badly [=happy / unhappy] ... men who have changed into women ... women who have changed into men... [A long list of sentient beings and objects follows].

crossing is later modified in the authoritative commentary (*attakathā*) to the *vinaya*, the *Samanāpassādikā* by the 5<sup>th</sup> century scholastic Buddhagosa, which also clarifies the occurrences of these sex changes: the reported transformations are only mentioned to have appeared in sleep.

The commentary then makes it clear, that the transference of preceptor, ordination and prestige is only meant to be in the case of already established status, stating that if sex change occurred before ordination, the person in question should not be ordained etc. Also in the tradition of a rival sub-school of Early Buddhism, the Mūlasarvāstivāda as transmitted in the Tibetan canon Kangjur '*dul ba (vinaya)*, sex/gender stability is a criterion for admission to ordination. In this context, only the change of sex more than three times is seen as an obstacle to ordination.<sup>5</sup>

Back to our Theravāda account, we find that the transformation is referred to by the appearance of the 'mark' of the opposite sex.

The Pāli term *liṅga* (sign, mark) is naturally understood as the secondary sex organ (sex characteristic) here. Taking into consideration, that the distinction between biological sex and cultured gender was not made in Classical India, can we interpret the word *liṅga* in this narrative in terms of gender characteristics? This could serve as an interesting springboard to modern Buddhist discourses on sex/gender diversity.

Still, we have to remind ourselves that there are more than two gender categories within Early Buddhist texts. The hermaphrodite (*both ...and*) and the neuter gender i.e. the *pandaka*<sup>6</sup> (*neither ... nor*) complement the male and the female gender. The subsequent fourfold division seems in my opinion intended to achieve the Buddhist fourfold logical tetralemma (*catuskoti*): *a* (male), *not-a* (female), *both ... and ...* (hermaphrodite), *neither ... nor ...* (*pandaka*).<sup>7</sup> Still, however the biological and cultured identity of these non-normative

5 J. GYATSO, *One Plus One Makes Three*, p. 110; cp. W. DONIGER, *Splitting the Difference*, p. 297.

6 The Pali Buddhist canon repeatedly mentions this 'queer', non-normative gender category, see L. ZWILLING, *Homosexuality as seen in Indian Buddhist texts* and J. I. CABEZÓN *Homosexuality and Buddhism*. The term, also used in the (still not translated) pre-Buddhist *Maitrāyaṇīya-Samohitā* of the Black *Yajurveda* to denote a 'third gender' aside 'male' and 'female', seems to be centred around the idea of 'lacking maleness' (*panodoaka* ~ 'without balls').

7 For this logical paradigm see D. S. RUEGG, *The uses of the four positions of the Catuskoti ...* and J. GANERI, *Philosophy in Classical India*, pp. 47-58.

categories may be defined,<sup>8</sup> they were not very inclusively dealt with within the *vinaya*: Both the hermaphrodite and the *pandaka* were totally excluded from ordination.<sup>9</sup>

Within the Buddhist gender discourse, what reasons are given for crossing sex/gender borders?

In his discussion of the presented *vinaya* passage on gender transformation within his commentary on one major scholastical text in the canon, the *Atthasālinī* on the *Dhammasaṅgani* of the Abhidhamma basket, the author – Buddhagosa – emphasises the agency of *karma* in the cases of sex-change, the predominance of unwholesome karmic conditions in the case of MtF, and of wholesome conditions in the case of FtM sex change. Hence, there is an underlying assumption on gender inequality, which we need to explore in more detail later.

Another instance of MtF sex change in another Early Buddhist narrative might provide corroborative evidence for the agency of causality, *karma*: The Story of Soreyya.<sup>10</sup>

Soreyya falls in love with the Elder Mahākaccāyana after having seen him in the bath. His wish to marry the Elder results in the instant transformation of his sex from male to female. She is then married off (to someone else) and bears children, and is eventually reversed into a male after having asked forgiveness from Mahākaccāyana.

Here, the MtF sex change is the result of 'instant karma,' fitting well into the interpretative frame put forward by Buddhagosa.

If we put these findings on the treatment of sex/gender transformation in Early Buddhism into the context of non-Buddhist Ancient Indian accounts on sex-change, a cultural pattern and some striking distinctions become obvious.

Maleness and virility is seen in the Vedic period as a sustaining and driving principle of society. For instance, the *Atharvaveda* (6, 138) contains a curse aiming to deprive maleness or virility from opponents, rendering them castrates (*vadhri* 'one whose testicles are cut out'),

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8 The Buddhist scriptures give conflicting descriptions on the nature of these persons, with later commentaries by Asaṅga, Buddhaghosa, and Yaśomitra (4-5th century CE) suggesting that the term covers a variety of "atypical" gender identity and sexual behaviour including passive anal homosexual activity, voyeurism, and possibly transvestism or transgenderism, cp. L. ZWILLING Homosexuality as seen in Indian Buddhist texts, 209 and P. HARVEY, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 416.

9 *Vinaya* i 85

10 Theravāda account: *Dhammapada commentary* 3. 9 on vers 43 (1.325-332 PTS), cp. the Sarvāstivāda account in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 4, 55a-b by Vasubandhu etc.

impotents (*kliba*) or weakling ('sissies', *arasa* 'sapless'), all lacking culturally defined maleness. Actually the loss of maleness is described as transgending into femaleness (hair dressed, wears hood V. 5).

Just to give one short example, in AV 5, 20 the castrate (*vadhrī*) is contrasted with the agent as such: "... Thou art a bull, thy enemies are impotent (*vadhrī*); ..." (vers 2c).

The terms used here such as *kliba* (AV 6, 138 etc.) will later come to denote the third gender that we find in late classical/early ME Hinduism.<sup>11</sup>

However, androgynic or metagender symbolism is found in Vedic religion as an expression of primordial monism; splitting the difference is both creation and decline. The enactment of the metagendered *in illo tempore* is reflected by countless myths of the Classical and Medieval period of Hinduism in which gods express their supremacy by gender liminality and fluidity. The high gods Visnu (Vishnu) and Śiva change sex frequently, most famously Vishnu as Śiva's lover Mohinī.

In the oldest version accounted in the Mahābhārata (1.16.39-40; 1. 17.8), Vishnu takes this form in order to regain the *ambrosia* (drink of immortality) from the demons. The sex transformation is necessary in order to employ successfully the stereotypical female gender strategy of seduction. This pattern is well testified in other Indo-European myths, e.g. the Germanic myth of Thor who dresses up as Freyja in order to regain his hammer from the Giants.

Later Purānas - mythical texts for devotional purposes - as the Brahmānda Purāna - have Śiva rape Vishnu as Mohinī and begets the god Mahāśāstā (Great Chastiser).<sup>12</sup>

Also Śiva himself appears in a popular androgynous form as **Ardhanāñśvara** (a vertically divided androgyn) attested first in a Syriac source of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE and appearing in Sanskrit texts from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE.<sup>13</sup>

11 See M. J. SWEET and L. ZWILLING, The First Medicalization, especially pp. 592seq, and M. J. SWEET and L. ZWILLING, The evolution of third-sex constructs in ancient India, passim.

12 Cp. Śiva-Purāna 3, 20, 3-7; Bhāgavata Purāna 10.88.14-36 etc; cp. W. DONIGER, *Splitting the difference*, pp. 261-265.

13 Notably in the poetry of Bhāsa and then later the Śiva-, Visnu-, Padma-, Vāya-, and Mārkaṇḍeya- Purāna; W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, p. 313.

In this form he is connected with the creation of the cosmos and of humans by 'splitting the difference' and inherits the older kosmogonic androgyny of the Rg-Vedic *Purusa* and the androgynous Prajāpati of the *Bṛāhmanas*.<sup>14</sup>

Androgynous kosmogonic myths are again well accounted for within other Indo-European and Non-IE cultures.

Śiva's frequent MtF sex changes as found in other mythic cycles have, however, another function: In female form, the high god destroys the male power of austerities built up by ascetics or powerful demons due to their rigorous sexual abstention.

In mythological or heroic narratives, both contemporary with, and post-dating, the rise of Buddhism – esp. within the Classical Epics *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, a great variety of human and heroic sex-changers is found such as Sudyumna – Ila (Īlā),<sup>15</sup> Bhaṅgāsavana,<sup>16</sup> princess - hero Ambā - Śikhandin,<sup>17</sup> Nārada, and even among major heroes such as Arjuna<sup>18</sup> and Krishna (Kṛsnā)<sup>19</sup> - Vishnu in human form just to mention a few.

In Indian culture, these sex-changes are regularly seen as a spontaneous complete physical transformation of one gender into another. The Hindu accounts of sex-changes generally employ a divine agent relating it to a curse or spell e.g. for interrupting Śiva and Pārvatī making love in the case of King Ila or by rejecting the love of a wooing goddess such as Arjuna.

Here we find an interesting distinction from the Buddhist narratives; as aforementioned, Buddhist sex changes normally employ the agency of causality (*karma*).

This karmic sex-change occurring in monks or nuns is accepted and meets no disciplinary sanction apart from the change of status (monk to nun or nun to monk).

14 W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, pp. 310-312.

15 *Mbh.* 1, 75. 18-19; *Rāmāyana* 7, 87-90 etc., s. W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, pp. 303-5; W. DONIGER, *Splitting the difference*, pp. 266-277.84;

16 *Mbh.* 13, 12, 1-49 cp. W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, pp. 305-306.

17 *Mbh.* 5. 189.2 ff. , cp. W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, pp. 307-308; R. VANITA and S. KIDWAI, *Same-Sex Love in India*, pp. 31-36.

18 *Mhb.* 3, App. 1, 6, 36-130 etc., cp. W. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, p. 298; 1999, W. DONIGER, *Splitting the Difference*, pp. 280-281; S. NANDA, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Belmont: Wadsworth 1999, pp. 30-31.

19 W. DONIGER, *Splitting the difference*, pp. 265-266.

When linking sex change to causality, Early Buddhist sources express a certain ambivalence regarding sex equality, as hinted upon before: Although the Buddha on several occasions explicitly expressed sex equality in the way that both monks and nuns can attain full enlightenment or *arhatship*, the early *sangha* soon adhered to a mainstream institutionalised misogyny leaving nuns in second place in the hierarchy of sentient being on the Buddhist path towards spiritual transformation. According to this, a female always has to be reborn as male before realising *arhatship*. This continues in common Buddhist thought in Southern Buddhism today and explains partly the great difficulties in re-establishing a fully recognised nun order in countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Northern Buddhism or Mahāyāna is quite divided on these issues, although its emphasis on compassion and skilful means generally strengthens the position of laypersons and women. Mahāyāna attitudes towards women in Buddhist texts regarding equality of potential has been categorised into: misogynic rejection, unequal acceptance, equal acceptance.<sup>20</sup> However, for the woman friendly minority of texts, in my opinion an important modification is called for: Equal acceptance generally relates to the highest view, held by the Buddha himself, but unequal relates to the attitude of the community e.g. represented by the Buddha's master student Śāriputra.

This two-standard attitude appears to underlie the famous story of the 8yr old divine cobra (*nāgā*) princess in Lotus Sūtra 12:<sup>21</sup> The noble Nāgā girl shows all signs of spiritual attainment which the Buddha confirms. Still, Śāriputra expresses doubt due to her being a female (!, not a Nāgā or child) and it is then that she voluntarily transforms herself into a male before entering the state of complete Buddhahood. Ratnakuta Sūtras such as the Sumati

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20 D. Y. PAUL, *Women in Buddhism*, p. 169.

21 For the following, cp. L. J. PEACH, Social responsibility, sex change, and salvation; S. YOUNG, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, pp. 191-210.



Sūtra<sup>22</sup> and the Pure Giving Sūtra<sup>23</sup>, the Pure Faith Sūtra<sup>24</sup> and other Mahāyāna Sūtras such as the Dialogue of the Girl Candrottara<sup>25</sup> reveal the same pattern of thinking:

Although, young female laypersons show, in front of the Buddha, spiritual attainments theoretically sufficient to prove highest realisation, the social reality of the community prompts them to change sex before manifesting Buddhahood.

This in contrast to Mahāyāna Sūtra's such as the Gangottara Sūtra and esp. Sūtra's such as the Sagarānāgārāja Sūtra and the famous Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, Śrīmālādevīsimhanāda: In these early, and in part extremely influential Mahāyāna Sūtras, a sex change is not necessary. Actually, in the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, the sceptical Śāriputra is magically transformed into a female to be taught a lesson on the irrelevance of sex/gender regarding spiritual potential!<sup>26</sup>

A totally new twist in the attitudes towards sex changes is found in the story of Upagupta in the Aśokarājāvadāna, 50.<sup>27</sup> The realised monk Upagupta changes sex twice voluntarily to teach a fellow monk a lesson. In the most elaborate instance, the fellow monk in question is notorious for his struggle to maintain his vows of celibacy. Upagupta as girl fakes drowning and gets rescued by the monk in question who consequently becomes aroused and starts to rape her. At the moment of vaginal penetration, the girl transforms herself back into old, male Upagupta giving the assaulter the shock of his life! There seem to be some interesting implications on the enlightened skilful use of homophobia here.<sup>28</sup> Even more important is the fact, that in this context spiritual attainment is seen to imply control over the 'mental sexual power that controls physical sex changes'.<sup>29</sup> MtF sex change is here a form of skilful means.

22 *Miào huì tóng nu hui* Sumati-dārikā-pariprcchā, Taisho 310, tr. into Chinese by Bodhiruci around 500 CE, cp. L.J. PEACH, Social responsibility, sex change, and salvation, p. 63.

23 *Wu gou shi pu sa ying bian hui* Vimaladattapariprcchā, Taisho 310, tr. into Chinese by Nieh Dao-chen; cp. L. J. PEACH, Social responsibility, sex change, and salvation, pp. 63-64.

24 *Dārikāvimalaśraddhā-Sūtra*, cp. L. J. PEACH, Social responsibility, sex change, and salvation, pp. 64-65.

25 *Yue shang nü jing*, Taisho 480; cp. D. Y. PAUL, *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 193-199.

26 *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 56-61; cp. W. DONIGER, *Splitting the difference*, p. 297; S. YOUNG, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, p. 195.

27 124c-25a; ~ 2nd Century CE, tr. into Chinese 302 by An Qi.

28 Cp. S. YOUNG, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, p. 201.

29 D. Y. PAUL, *Women in Buddhism*, p. 175.

Finally, we need to draw our attention to a whole new dimension of spiritual metagenderism: the “Soteriological Androgyny” within Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>30</sup> In Buddhist Tantra, male practitioners transcend gender boundaries regularly in spiritual androgyny either in meditating in female forms or integrating male and female polarities in tantric sexual union. Here, we can speak of spiritual transgenderism in order to achieve transcendence of gender (*metagenderism*). This leads to a totally new set of paradigms.

To conclude: Modern discourse by Buddhist thinkers can benefit greatly from the non-judgemental paradigm and pragmatic reaction set out by the Buddha when responding to sex change within the *sangha*. Against a Western misconception, *karma* - causality – in the Buddhist context implies taking responsibility in the present but not the blame, guilt or “sin” of the past. The karmic agency of non-normative sex / gender identities and sexualities is the key towards an inclusive and non judgemental acceptance of the whole variety of human conditions. Liberal Buddhist thinking, in e.g. contemporary Thailand, already employs this kind of argumentation towards homosexualities and the *kathoey* (transgender) phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> In the light of the traditional discriminatory monastic legislation towards Indian Buddhist non-binary genders such as the androgynous and the neuter gender (*pandaka*), this already constitutes a remarkable progress towards inclusiveness. In using the discussed *vinaya* passage, this liberating stream of thinking can put forward a strong argument against those relating modern transgenderism to obvious homophobic practises within the early *sangha*.

By incorporating the modern Western distinctions between sex, gender and sexualities into a Buddhist discourse, the Buddha’s approach to his followers’ needs and capacities can be applied towards e.g. transgenderism and homosexuality in a truly humane way.

At the same time, Buddhism ultimately points towards transcending gender limitations into a metagendered monism - thus mirroring the Early Buddhist cosmological myths in which the development of sex/gender is seen as decline from the primordial state of union.<sup>32</sup>

By doing so, gender-crossing as a skilful means can be seen as a possible step towards true metagenderism.

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30 See A. SPONBERG, Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism.

31 Cp. P. A. JACKSON, Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist Tradition.

32 Cp. S. YOUNG, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, p. 191.

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