

**The Bonpo Mendrup (*sMan sgrub*) Ritual: Its Medicine, Texts,  
Traceable History, and Current Practice**

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This thesis studies the mendrup (*sman sgrub*) ritual of Bon (Bon). The religious tradition called Bon can be characterised as a denomination of Tibetan tantric Buddhism, particularly in its monasticised form called “Eternal Bon” (Yungdrung, g.Yung drung Bon). The tradition is in various aspects distinct from Buddhism, particularly in acclaimed independent origin and history, own venerated masters and scriptures, certain practices, incorporation of a significant extent of Tibetan indigenous and pre-Buddhist notions, and, above all, identity. Yet, Bon shares many concepts and practices of Buddhism stemming from India, which began to significantly influence the Tibetan Plateau in the seventh century A.D. The Bonpo Mendrup ritual presented here epitomises such a monastic setting of Yungdrung Bon. The Mendrup ritual of Yungdrung Bon is a tantric *sādhana* (Tib. *sgrub thabs*, *sgrub pa*) meditative practice and consecration rite of transforming various substances into a product ascribed extraordinary effects. The ritual process itself and the produced medicine, *men* (*sman*), are applied for healing, rejuvenation, longevity, as well as for great spiritual enhancement. The rite encompasses a variety of overlapping spheres of knowledge and religion, such as tantra and ritual, Buddhist soteriology and philosophy, the Tibetan Sowa rikpa (*gso ba rig pa*) medical tradition, and Tibetan indigenous notions. The Bonpo mendrup ritual when performed on a large scale represents one of the most elaborate healing rituals we can find in the present Tibetan milieu. It is also probably one of the rarest, special, most demanding and expensive Tibetan rituals still practised. By the Bonpo community it is believed to be extremely powerful, an event one should witness at least once in a lifetime.

This study follows one particular example of the Bonpo mendrup tradition called the Light-Swirled Mendrup (sMan sgrub 'o zer 'khyil ba) as it was performed in the exile Bonpo monastery of Tritten Norbutse (Khri brtan nor bu rtse) near Kathmandu, Nepal, in December 2012. It introduces the Tibetan mendrup practice in a more thorough detail that has been done so far by an ethnographic account of one actual instantiation and its articulated objectives, translations of the main texts and recitations employed during the ceremony, analyses of several of the fundamental concepts constituting the ritual, and also a short historiographic summary on the perceived history of the Bonpo mendrup ritual. Throughout the work, focus is given to the specific substance of the so called mendrup medicine, the material core and produce of the ritual. The different understandings of the mendrup medicine in various contexts within the ritual itself are examined: (1) In the current Bonpo oral narratives on its origin and transmission accompanying the performance of the ritual; (2) In the textual tradition of Bonpo historical documents, where the medicine appears as an important ritual practice passed down via several Bonpo lineages of teachings; (3) In the textual tradition of the Mendrup ritual, in which the medicine plays a rather symbolic role framed by Buddhist Doctrinal philosophical and cosmological ideas, and is, moreover, likely influenced by Tibetan indigenous conceptions; (4) The materiality of the prepared physical mendrup medicine provided for consumption and practically compounded following the standards of Sowa rikpa, the Tibetan medical tradition; (5) The current apprehension and administration of the medicine which reflects all these dimensions. The Mendrup is also shown as an important social event of the Bonpo community and along with its medicine a significant financial investment. I pay attention to the different emic explanations of the ritual and its medicine in these discourses and provide their etic analyses.

The work is based on several different sources of data: (1) Observation of the ritual as it was celebrated at the monastery of Tritten Norbutse, Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2012; (2) Translations and analyses of the scriptures of the ritual; (3) Close work with the main practitioner of the Sowa rikpa tradition in charge of the ritual's produced medicine; (4) Interviews with members of the Bonpo community; and, (5) Translations and analyses of Bonpo historical writings.

Initially, the first chapter defines the Mendrup ritual as an extent meditative *sādhana* practice that includes production and consumption of a consecrated and empowered substance referred to as “medicine” (*men*). It also provides an etymological explanation of the name of the ritual, and the various possible meanings of the “medicine” in Tibetan ritual context

ranging to the general significance of “benefit”. Within the varied Tibetan mendrup rites, The Light-Swirled Mendrup stands as a major monastic practice of *drupchen* type, contrasted to smaller and more frequent mendrup conceptions for the sake of enhancement of standard Sowa rikpa medicinal drugs. It also stands as one of the two main great mendrup celebrations of the leading monasteries of Bon, regarded as very powerful and prestigious, which in the past have presumably taken place only once in about sixty years. The chapter then reveals the possible transmission of the Mendrup ritual and its medicine. According to the present oral narratives, the practice and the medicine are believed to come from the deities, and the scriptures to be treasures uncovered in the early eleventh and twelfth century. Since then, the practice and medicine is supposed to have been passed down in an unceasing succession of Bonpo masters, associated with the main Bonpo monasteries in Central Tibet, and then eventually into India and Nepal after the half of the twentieth century. The practice relies on the ritual’s scriptures, as well as on the accompanying oral explanations, which are in traditional Tibet said to have passed down among the highest authorities of the Menri monastery.

A survey of Bonpo historical documents follows, showing that the Bonpo mendrup practice seems probable to be traced back to the twelfth, or at least the thirteenth, century in Central Tibet. The twelfth and thirteenth century was also a crucial time for the establishment of the Sowa rikpa. The Mendrup ritual presents an example of the then contemporary intellectual milieu in Central Tibet, in which the spheres of tantra, medicine, alchemy, Buddhist philosophy and soteriology, and indigenous concepts, merged and mixed to produce new complex structures. The mendrup ritual combines the knowledge and practices of all these elements, and is very likely to have developed in this milieu. Thus, in the dating it accords with Buddhist mendrup rites, the Nyingma treasure and *Yutok Nyingtik* traditions. Different versions of the discovery and transmission of The Light-Swirled Mendrup of Trowo Tsochok Khagying can be tracked in the texts studied. The scattered reference to the mendrup practice indicates that it has been transmitted by Bonpo teacher-student lineages mainly in Central Tibet, where it has been also preserved until modern times. The sources attest a certain existing variety of the mendrup ritual in general, likely reflecting the multiple existing lineages of Bon. The texts suggest that over the centuries specific lineage traditions developed their own traditions of mendrup, but also that even the transmission of the specific Light-Swirled Mendrup dedicated to Trowo Tsochok Khagying was not confined to the single Dru family line which preserves the practices today. Textual evidence suggests that this practice

was transferred by and to other lineages as well, as the Shen, the Pa, and the Meu. A certain development of the recording of the practice can be observed, ranging from a short mention in the thirteenth century to the most extend justification of the practice's lineage in the twentieth century. Even in such an important case as the given Mendrup, as far as the community is presently concerned, the Bonpos have relied only on one commentary from the fourteenth century. Oral knowledge and personal transmission are obviously important for the imparting of ritual knowledge. However, the textual tradition also presents remarkable details of the mendrup practice and performance, proving the authors' close apprehension of and likely own experience with the ritual, and thus the execution of the practice throughout the history. The evidence available demonstrates that the Mendrup has been an important healing ritual practice for the Bonpos for the last seven or eight hundred years. It remains a question to which extent and in which dimensions the practice has been alternating over the centuries, but we can assume quite a high degree of continuity. The commentary by Nyö Tsültrim Gyeltsen from the fourteenth century gives accurate guidance throughout the rite, which suggests that the Mendrup ritual's practice probably has not significantly changed since his times. The individual stages of the ritual as we know it today might have been expanded, elaborated, etc., but not created anew, and still have to follow Nyö Tsültrim Gyeltsen's writing as the Bonpos did in Triten Norbutse in 2012.

The second chapter conveys a detailed ethnographic description of the contemporary Bonpo Mendrup preparations and ceremonial performance. It discloses the actual celebration, its progression, and the main parts of the ritual: the preliminary activities, the main activities comprising blessings and accomplishments of the invoked peaceful and wrathful deities of the Trowo Tsochok Khagying's cycle, and the concluding empowerment. Upon the festive completion, the mendrup medicine was distributed along with blessings of the main masters of Triten Norbutse monastery, Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung. Throughout the ritual, the medicine formed the centre and focus of the ritual action arranged on and around the *maṇḍala* of the ritual. It underwent two main stages: at first, the medicine was blessed by the peaceful and wrathful deities in its rough and unground form, and only afterwards in its ground, powdered form. In this particular Mendrup performance, modern technology was employed to powder most of the medicine in advance, due to its accessibility, the enlarged dimensions of the ritual and of the volume of the medicine made. A comparison with other *drupchen* and minor mendrup rituals of the Bonpos, as well as with Buddhist mendrup rituals, would be an topic for future research as a complement to this account.

Stemming from the Menri monastery in Central Tibet, in the exile, even such an authoritative practice as the Mendrup of Trowo Tsochok Khagying exercises a high degree of flexibility, and is capable to adapt to different conditions, as in the example of grinding the medicine. Both the texts and oral instructions kept by memory cope with the new setting. Before each performance, the actual organisation of the mendrup, incorporating other concomitant ritual practices, is renegotiated anew. Now it reflects the globalised environment and modern challenges of the exile, such as contemporary global phenomena recognised as negative for which the mendrup is organised to overcome and balance. The universalistic apprehension of mendrup and its medicine is applied to tangible happenings worldwide. Similarly, the performance of the ritual itself exercises many contemporary adaptations. The fundamental three parts of the ritual were for the celebration in 2012 set into a month of adjoining rituals and festivities. The whole is thus composed of different ritual “bricks”, the core of which constituted the Mendrup itself, another part were complementary rites, but obligatory to accompany the Mendrup according to the Dru ritual tradition of Menri and Triten Norbutse monasteries, and lastly, a significant part was formed by voluntary additions of other rituals and events. The purpose of such clustering of ritual and ritualised activities was expressed to be the rare and auspicious occasion of a great Mendrup celebration, whose auspiciousness would, furthermore, increase with more ritual extensions. This perception of a possible augmentation of effects of a ritual is quite conventional in Tibetan religious environment. Nevertheless, the Mendrup ceremony of 2012 also attracted new and unconventional additions, such as an international academic symposium on Bon, English teachings on the ritual and the general Doctrine of Bon organised for the visiting members of the so called Western sangha, as well as celebrations of the New Year of 2013 according to the Western Gregorian calendar. The ascribed importance to the rite and its medicine by the Bonpo community was reflected also by their social and economic dimensions, both of which, again, spoke to the globalised acceptance of the practice.

Chapter Three outlines the chief scriptures of the Mendrup ritual, which compose the ritual’s so called *zhung*. The four compositions of the *zhung*, along with a fifth supplement, list the obligatory parts of the Mendrup and contain its main recitations. Of these the most significant and characteristic constitute the core Mendrup text entitled *The Main Text of the Light/Swirled Nectar Medicine*. The Chapter presents their excerpts in English translation based on a diplomatic edition of three available versions of the Mendrup scriptures: one manuscript used in Triten Norbutse during the ritual, and two facsimile of manuscripts in

published works. The translation reveals the arrangement of the ritual according to the frequent *maṇḍalic* organisational principle of tantric rituals, in this case centred around the deity of Trowo Tsochok Khagying. Upon this pattern, the meditations and visualisations of the *sādhana* exercise are established. Such overall ritual framework clearly belongs to tantric Buddhism and is very common in Tibetan ritual practice. In the Mendrup recitation, it was filled in by general Buddhist categories of Doctrinal philosophical and cosmological tenets. Moreover, it also contained vocabulary and mentions of rites that can be taken as specifically Bonpo, i.e. belonging to the Bonpo monastic, or in some cases even non-monastic, religious and ritual traditions – such as the *shen* divinities and the *tseṅ* purification. The texts also exercised an obvious incorporation of elemental principles of the Tibetan Sowa rikpa medical tradition, which, too, were fitted into the *maṇḍalic* scheme of five cardinal points. In addition, the rendered major mantras of the Mendrup also hint such a conglomerate character of the practice.

The following analysis of the translated excerpts then focuses on the different conceptualisations of the Mendrup medicine, taking as its basis the divergent appellations of the medicine reoccurring in the texts and the set pairs of oppositions into which the medicine is placed. Therefore, the expressions *men*, “medicine”, and *dütsi*, “nectar”, in contrast to their antipoles, *dü*, “demon”, and *duk*, “poison”, are scrutinised. The terms show a rather complicated and multi-layered nature indicating all the aspects of the Bonpo Mendrup just enumerated above. Via an exposition of the emic apprehensions of the Mendrup medicine communicated by the texts, the hidden complex interplay between Buddhist Doctrinal philosophical precepts adopted by monastic Bon, and, on the other hand, Tibetan indigenous ideas, became apparent. In the first context, the Mendrup medicine gains a rather symbolic role representing these standard and forecast precepts, whereas in the latter it alludes concrete divinities of Tibetan non-Buddhist pantheon and the powerful substances associated with them, be it beneficial beings with healing elixirs or demons linked to poison. Along with these lines, the ambivalent character of the concept of *dü*, “demon”, or more appropriately, the “powerful one” or “capable one”, was shown. Likewise, the antagonism between *men* and *dütsi*, and then *dü* and *duk* was shown in a frame of possible transformation of one pole into the opposite one. In the same manner, the Mendrup ritual initiates a transformation of both symbolic or concrete negative entities into positive ones.

The most part of the following Chapter Four is dedicated to the prescription of the Mendrup medicine, its concrete physical preparation and compounding. A bare translation of

the recipe is followed by a more explicit rendition showing how the recipe is actually put into practice for the identification of the substances listed. In the exile situation for the Mendrup performance in Triten Norbutse in 2012, the medicinal recipe was read by the eyes of a Mustangi lay and *ngakpa* medical practitioner called Amchi Nyima. As the principle teacher and practitioner of Sowa rikpa in the monastery, he was appointed to take responsibility for gathering the substances and the preparation of the medicine. Amchi Nyima comes from a hereditary lineage of household priests and practitioners of Sowa rikpa. He received his medical education within both his family and following a more standardised Sowa rikpa curriculum at the exile Bonpo medical school in Dhorpatan in Nepal. Based on this funding and own extent pharmacological and clinical expertise, he interpreted the Mendrup recipe according to own understanding and in some cases localised, i.e. Mustangi and of the Nepalese Western Himalayas, botanical and zoological knowledge. He paid great attention to follow the complex formula of over one hundred items as closely as possible, and in instances of difficult identification consulted other specialists. His reading was also informed by oral traditions accompanying the written text and transmitted within the Dru lineage. The final compounding and processing of the Mendrup medicine depended upon his decisions. Moreover, after the reading, practicalities and given circumstances came into play, and, again, some components had to be renegotiated. Given the high number of potential variables and hardly understandable items, it is very likely that the same recipe receives a quite different materialisation at each time the Mendrup is organised.

The medicine of The Light-Swirled Mendrup demands a preparation procedure of many stages and many months. The core of this healing medicinal substance, the *papta* fermenting component, embodies the particular Bonpo lineage's generations of masters, teachings, and knowledge transmission. It can be said that it materially expresses the lineage, which is believed to span from ancient times to the monasteries in Tibet and then those in the exile, and to guarantee the ritual's efficacy. Most ingredients in the prescription come from the repertoire of Tibetan medicinal drug mixing, but some reflect the notion of the five tantric nectars, i.e. semen, flesh, stool, blood, and urine. The organisational principle of the medicine is fivefold, again that of a *maṇḍala*, and also in a much smaller extend eightfold reflecting the eight classes of consciousness. In this *maṇḍalic* composition of the medicine, each cardinal point is ascribed certain properties and healing effects, which then determine the pharmacological characteristics of substances required for each quarter. The *maṇḍalic* scheme and the medicine again combine the different discourses of the Mendrup ritual, namely Indo-

Tibetan tantric and ritual, Buddhist philosophical, and medical of Sowa rikpa. As the pattern of a *maṇḍala* generally serves as a device of classification of phenomena within a ritual, in the Mendrup studied it provides a classification of the *materia medica*, and the realm of and animals. The first fivefold part of the Mendrup recipe conveyed animal classification based on tantric and cosmological principles. The second half of the recipe can be shown as comprising a classification of plants, or, more precisely, Sowa rikpa medicinal substances, great majority of which are plants, based on the principles of Sowa rikpa and its categorisation of bodily forces and derived categorisation of illnesses. This capacity of categorisation of the Mendrup rite and the recipe is not surprising, and corresponds to the usual *maṇḍalising* arrangements of any phenomena in ritual and tantric visualisation practices.

The concluding and shorter fifth chapter demonstrated the various emic interpretations and administrations of the mendrup medicine. Both the performance and the mendrup medicine are shown to be perceived as a remedy restoring the ideal balance of all sentient beings inside their bodies and minds, as well as of the cosmos. On the worldly level this is articulated as health, longevity, rejuvenation, death prevention, etc., on the soteriological as a subsidy to the awakening. The mendrup medicine was assigned miraculous effects and utilised in various ways: granted to divinities as an offering, consumed as a universal drug, prophylaxis, or a tonic boosting physical and mental strength, taken as a relief and spiritual support before death, disposed into the environment to establish peace, hidden into the ground to bring fertility and prosperity, and prevent natural disasters, and worn as an amulet for protection and a better rebirth. Interestingly, the benefits of the ritual and administration of its medicine was shown to extend to all sentient beings, in practice often domestic animals. The understandings of the mendrup medicine differed among the groups of the Bonpo community, their education, daily experience and needs: The monastics perceived the mendrup medicine as a figurative support accompanying a ritual practice aimed at the highest spiritual goal of awakening; Lay participants took the digestion of the mendrup mixture of more practical application in physical and mental healing; Whereas practitioners of Sowa rikpa considered the substance within the Sowa rikpa tradition. Nonetheless, these views overlapped, as it was especially exemplified in the comprehensions of the lay tantric practitioners, the *ngakpas*. The supposed balancing effects of the rite and its medicine were often stressed by the Bonpo community as extending to the universe, and also into our worldly political and ecological spheres. As a postscript to this thesis, it should be added that after the conduction of the Mendrup in 2012, the Nepalese Congress Party came as a winner from the new Parliamentary



elections in Nepal in November 2013. From the emic perspective, this was accredited to the Mendrup ritual, and the goal of stabilising the Nepalese political scene by overcoming the Maoist political parties was one of those adopted before the Mendrup. Nevertheless, the great earthquake in Nepal in April 2015 worked somehow against the acclaimed results of the Mendrup.

It is within the global context and funding that the Bonpo Mendrup and mendrup are nowadays conducted much more often than they are said to have used to be. In the past, the Bonpo grand monastic mendrup celebration was confined to a single performance in the life of each abbot of the Menri monastery in Tibet, supposedly at an interval of approximately sixty years. The current Bonpo exile monasteries, Menri in India and Triten Norbutse in Nepal, have promoted the mendrup practice, and institutionalised it as a relatively frequent event taking place every ten, or even less, years. The rising frequency of the mendrup performances reflects the social dimensions the practice holds. It is the greater Bonpo community of laymen enabling this development. The mendrup has been traditionally, as far as can be understood, taken as a rare event of extraordinary powers. As such, it is a well-attended, and a long-awaited and important happening of the believers' life. It functions as a social bond for the Bonpos, in the present complicated political situation also stretching across the well-guarded international borders of Nepal and India, and the People's Republic of China. The practice re-establishes ties between the monastic institutions and their lay adherents, as well as between different geographical regions and sometimes very far-away Bonpo settlements. In the modern context, the mendrup practice adopts elements of globalisation. The preparation of the mendrup medicine incorporates globalised goods, is sponsored from various places around the world, and upon its completion is again globally distributed. Modernity also diverts some parts of the practice from its original form, i.e. the mechanical grinding of the medicine before the ritual, which, moreover, enables a massive production of the mendrup medicine at a time, and then its widespread distribution. The argument justifying the former scarcity of the mendrup performances by the immense cost of the required ingredients for the mendrup medicine, cannot be beheld any more. At the present, the much larger share of expenditures for the ritual goes towards its organisation, the daily offerings to the deities invoked, hosting of all participants and visitors, and financial rewards granted to performing monks. Neither the argument of difficult access to or acquisitions of some of the required substances does find any ground in the global society of interlinked market and flow of goods.

The sponsorship conditioning the ritual's practice represents a very important dimension of the whole undertaking. The generally increasing income and standard of living in Asia and elsewhere generates better funding opportunities, and thus better opportunities to conduct expensive rituals such as the mendrup. As the mendrup celebration has been embraced by the main Bonpo monasteries to be their major elaborate public affair, it is this practice that particularly attracts attention and a special status. At such occasions, this Bonpo transnational social, economic, and religious network reaffirms the leadership of the organising institutions and masters, and the devotion and support of their followers worldwide. This cohesion is materially expressed through the dissemination of the mendrup medicine. The mendrup ritual and its medicine therefore also serve as an overt expression of Bonpo identity, and justification of its leading monasteries and the Dru lineage, and their sacred religious knowledge and power transmitted. At the present we do witness a growing frequency and popularity of the practice. The future will reveal if this will continue to be the trend.

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### **Papers presented** (selected)

(3.8.2017) “Tibetan Bonpo Mendrub: the Bonpo precious formula’s transmission and practice”, conference Medicine and Yoga in South and Inner Asia: Body Cultivation, Therapeutic Intervention and the Sowa rigpa Industry, Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna & Institute of Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences.

(30.1.2017, 4.5.2017) “Power Politics of Nyanpo Yutse: the Divine Lineage of Golog Leaders”, 2<sup>nd</sup> International workshop of the Amdo Research Network, Charles University, Prague & Oriental Institute, University of Oxford.

(1.9.2016) “Exploring Bonpo mendrup ritual texts: On flexibilities of interpretation, potencies of ritual and medicinal substances, and the implications for their translations”, workshop ‘Potent substances’ between Asia and Europe: Redefining *materia medica* in Tibetan and Himalayan Medicine and Buddhist Ritual, Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna.

(20.6.2016) “A Short Account of A myes rma chen’s 2014 Horse Year Pilgrimage: a Powerful Deity or a National Geopark?”, The 14<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Bergen.

(23.6.2015) “Nub gling gi bod rig pa’i ’byung ba’i skor” (The Origins of Tibetan Studies), Qinghai University for Minorities, Xining.

(31.3.2015) “Nub gling bas bod kyi rtsom rig skor la bzung ba’i lta ba” (Tibetan Literature Approached by the West), Minzu University of China, Beijing.

(10.11.2014) “Tibetan Studies in the West”, Tibet University, Lhasa.

(4.6.2014) “Amnye Machen as the King of the *rma*”, workshop Worldly Protectors in Tibetan Religions, Wolfson College, University of Oxford.

(23.3.2014) “Medicinal Mandala: Tibetan Medicine in Ritual”, conference Bodies in Balance, Rubin Museum of Art, New York.

(22.7.2013) “The Bonpo *sman sgrub* ritual”, The 13<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Ulaanbaatar.

(6.6.2013) “The Bonpo *sman sgrub* ritual: Materiality of a Tantric Healing Ceremony”, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford.

(1.2.2013) “The Bonpo and Buddhist Pilgrimage of the Dragon Crystal Mountain, Dolpo”, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford.

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### **Translations**

(2013) Bonpo ritual texts featured in ethnographic film *Blood for the Gods: Ritual Revival among the Pumi people in Southwest China*, project “Icons and Innovation in Southwest China’s Religious Texts”, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford (Translation Tibetan/English).

(2008) Poems at exhibition of Israeli artist and poet Margo Paran *Wandering After Little Hints*, Education and Culture Center, Jewish Museum, Prague (Translation Hebrew/Czech).

### **Media**

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(2008-2011) Series and articles on Tibet, Nepal, China and Israel, *Czech Radio*.

(2008) “Celý Izrael z daru?” (Does the Whole of Israel Come From a Gift?: Jewish Philanthropy), *Literární noviny (Literary News, Prague)*, vol. 19, no. 30, p. 8.

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