

Buddhist Values, Action for Sustainability and the Earth Charter

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IN this paper I introduce the voices of members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) who are engaged in environmental activism in various fields and countries around the world. These case studies are taken from the SGI website.

In analyzing what shapes SGI members' activism, I quote from these case studies to show how their involvement has been shaped by their Buddhist values, beliefs and practice.

The Principles of Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren (1222–82) is a controversial figure in the history of medieval Japanese Buddhism, who dared to challenge those who he felt misrepresented the message of Buddhism. His image is not necessarily that of a passionate environmentalist.

To individual SGI members such as myself, repeated study of his writings and his life reveals him as an appealing character, emotional and passionate, erudite and thorough. His belief in the essential message of the Lotus Sutra, that the Buddha nature exists in all life, is an optimistic one that gives people hope.

Professor Carlos Rubio of the Complutense University of Madrid, who recently translated the writings of Nichiren into Spanish, has described him in the following way:

Nichiren, in my view, is a unique and notable figure among religious leaders. In translating his writings into Spanish, I was deeply moved by his humane qualities and behavior. Japanese society at that time was feudalistic and strongly conformist, and it was common for the religious schools and their leaders to ingratiate themselves with those wielding power and authority. Nichiren, however, went directly against this tendency. . . . More than simply transcending the powerful cultural ethos of his time that held individuals back from speaking out against the norms of society, Nichiren was willing to continually risk his life to

voice the truth as he saw it. If I were to attempt to encapsulate Nichiren's character in a single phrase, I would characterize it as "the spirit of challenge."¹

To SGI members, this "spirit of challenge" is a key part of Nichiren's legacy.

While Nichiren believed that he was living at the start of the age of the Latter Day of the Law, or Mappo, his outlook was by no means fatalistic or gloomy.

Nichiren's focus was on this world and equipping people with the spiritual resources needed to survive and even thrive within it. To him, Shakyamuni Buddha was not a remote figure but an exemplary human being. As he said: "The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being."²

And while human beings were his audience and his main focus, his way of viewing the world was naturally a non-dualistic one that did not allow for any separation between life and its environment. He writes:

Life at each moment encompasses the body and mind and the self and environment of all sentient beings in the Ten Worlds as well as all insentient beings in the three thousand realms, including plants, sky, earth, and even the minutest particles of dust. Life at each moment permeates the entire realm of phenomena and is revealed in all phenomena.³

If one believes, or even tries to believe, that all life has intrinsic value, then it is likely one will act, or try to act, in a way consistent with this view. A lack of awareness of the interrelatedness and inseparability of one's own life and those of others—human or otherwise—is more likely to be linked to justifying discriminatory attitudes and destructive behavior toward others and the environment.

As one indication of SGI members' perspectives on this issue, a survey of SGI-USA members carried out in 1997 by Phillip Hammond and David Machacek found that 81% of respondents agreed with the statement that "Nature is spiritual or sacred in itself," against 24% in the USA General Social Survey, adjusted for age.⁴

Buddhism stresses three kinds of relationships: those between humans and nature, those between human beings, and the relationship with oneself. As Nichiren Buddhists, SGI members consider all these entities to be interconnected on the deepest dimension, inextricably

linked and interdependent.

Nichiren wrote: "... if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure and impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds."⁵ Changing our "minds" then becomes the key challenge for us as practitioners.

To quote a young woman SGI member in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, currently working at the Ivorian Center for Combatting Pollution:

Buddhism teaches the concept of oneness of self and environment, the process whereby the mutually interrelated human life and its environment operate together in a creative way. This made me realize that the health of the environment depends upon a change in the awareness of each individual (Aurélié Neame Koueli, Côte d'Ivoire).⁶

The transformation we are aiming for is the development of what we call the "Greater Self," emulating the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, continually strengthening our compassion and taking action to alleviate the sufferings of others. In today's world, the bodhisattva's embrace needs to widen to be big enough to include not just other human beings, but the entire planet.

A member of SGI-Korea who is engaged in an effort to clean up a local river reflects:

... as I chant every night upon returning home from a day of volunteer work, I feel a deep sense of fulfillment, which in turn becomes a source of energy to continue my efforts. As Nichiren Daishonin states in his writings, "If one lights a fire for others, one will brighten one's own way."⁷... It is deeply rewarding to know that the small step of deciding to do something positive, and my efforts to convey to others the spirit of coexisting with nature, have led to a revival of the environment and the lives of those around me (Shin Won-suk, Korea).⁷

SGI members describe this process of inner change as "human revolution." In the words of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, "A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind."⁸

A young woman member of SGI-USA who works at the interface of public health and ecology with experience in Africa and Latin America comments:

As challenges arose, my parents taught me about the Buddhist concept of the oneness of life and its environment, which explains how our lives and our environment are inextricably connected. At times when I am struggling, it is always easier to blame external circumstances; however, the empowering aspect of this teaching is that a profound change in ourselves gives rise to a change in our environment (Amy Yomiko Vittor, USA).⁹

The interconnectedness of all life described in Nichiren Buddhism as “engi” or dependent origination is starkly visible in global problems such as climate change and deforestation.

SGI members tend to bring their Buddhist perspective and values directly into their approach to their work.

To quote another SGI member who works as a city planner in Hong Kong:

Buddhist philosophy, based on respect and concern for all life, accords closely with the concept of sustainable development. ...It means creating social harmony and equality, protecting the environment and ensuring economic prosperity. Buddhism itself is essentially about bringing all these elements of life into balance, whether on a personal level or a community or global level.... What this means fundamentally is that we cannot build happiness or prosperity upon the destruction or disregard of other life, including the natural environment, for ultimately we ourselves will suffer the consequences (Fung Ling, Hong Kong).¹⁰

The Ideals of SGI

The way Nichiren Buddhism is interpreted and realized within SGI is derived from the perspectives of its founding presidents. Their examples and commentary on Nichiren’s writings and the Lotus Sutra provide an ethical framework for SGI members.

Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), founder of Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, the predecessor of Soka Gakkai and the SGI, was an educator and an expert on geography. His book *A Geography of Human Life* elucidates in great detail the fundamental influence of the local environment on people’s lives.

The relationship between human beings and the earth is very complex, but it is not something remote from our daily lives. Rather, the people/earth relationship is involved in everything we do, and it affects every aspect of our experience...¹¹

To quote Andrew Gebert and Monte Joffe in a paper titled “Value Creation as the Aim of Education: Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Soka Education”:

Rather than merely examine physical geography, Makiguchi probed the dynamic relationship between geography and the psychological aspects of human life. ... Makiguchi held that education based on an awareness of the connections between human life and the natural and social environment could help develop the moral character of students.¹²

Makiguchi encountered Nichiren Buddhism relatively late in life, but found its values and philosophy matched perfectly his concern to save people from suffering and create the greatest positive value. He became convinced that the spirituality of Nichiren's teachings was aligned with rational, scientific, universal laws; and was meant to be fully engaged and integrated with the realities of life in society. He wrote: “Other than freeing people and the world from suffering, what meaning could there be for the existence of religion in society?”¹³

The philosophy and practice of Nichiren Buddhism emphasize the supreme value of life and stress the possibility of positive change and infinite development of individual human potential. This explains its appeal to the disempowered in post-war Japanese society, and why the Soka Gakkai grew extremely rapidly in the two decades following 1945, initially under the leadership of second president Josei Toda (1900–58), who saw his mission as “eliminating misery from the world.”

Much of the focus in the organization’s early days in Japan was on enabling “the poor and the sick” to get their lives on a more stable footing.

This focus on worldly flourishing in the Soka Gakkai and SGI has sometimes led to accusations that materialism is being encouraged.

The perspective of Nichiren Buddhism is that the physical and spiritual dimensions of life are ultimately inseparable. Human beings are justified in seeking living standards which provide for basic needs in order to alleviate human suffering (consonant with the Buddhist value of compassion) and to open to everyone the concrete experience of dignity (the value of respect for the inherent dignity of life). Many of our members around the world face enormous difficulties due to poverty and exclusion, and we believe that such issues must be tackled on an individual and societal level.

However, of course, untrammelled desire, or greed, cannot lead to sustainable development. We consider greed to be one of “three poisons” which are the fundamental sources of human suffering.

Nichiren Buddhism teaches that we should not be enslaved by our personal desires, but should direct and transform them toward more inclusive desires, say, for the happiness of our community and the flourishing of the broader community of life. In this light, desires can be a vital stimulus for creating positive value.

Inevitably, it is what we refer to as the “inconspicuous benefits” of our practice that are the most valuable and enduring, what Nichiren called “the treasures of the heart.” As he writes in one of his letters, “More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all. From the time you read this letter on, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart!”¹⁴

As individuals, and as an organization, we also believe it is important that societies adopt a more balanced set of values, which stress the cultural, social and spiritual aspects of life alongside the economic and material. This is the main reason we have supported the Earth Charter as an expression of holistic, shared values for sustainability. It provides common ground on which we can stand, together with other individuals, faith groups and civil society partners.

Concerning the challenge of balancing material well-being and concern for the planet, we particularly relate to the following phrase in the Preamble of the Earth Charter: “We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.”¹⁵

According to a survey of SGI members in the UK undertaken in 1990, the majority of SGI members identified as “pure post-materialists”—75%, as against 21% of the UK population adjusted for age. Only 5% were categorized as pure or mixed materialists, against 49% of the UK population.¹⁶ In SGI-USA, in a survey undertaken in 1997, a lower percentage, 45% identified as pure post-materialist, against 11% in the general population, yet here also only 25% of SGI-USA members were categorized as pure or mixed materialist, against 69% of the population.¹⁷

If we examine how SGI engages in sustainability in today’s world, the writings of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda are a key influence.

Every year since 1983, Mr. Ikeda has written peace proposals which offer Buddhist-inspired ways of looking at current problems and concrete suggestions for ways forward in dealing with them.

Environmental themes have been a recurrent theme, starting with a proposal he authored in 1978. In a paper on “The Environmental Problem and Buddhism” published by the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in 1990, he states: “External desertification of the planet corresponds precisely with spiritual desertification of the force of life. Human relations with nature are intimately bound up in interpersonal relations and with the relationship of the self and its inner life. The egoism of human beings whose internal environments are polluted and desolate invariably manifests itself in domination, deprivation and destruction in the external environment.”¹⁸

Ikeda consistently stresses the importance of education and, in particular, education aimed at empowerment. In a proposal authored at the time of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, he called for the establishment of a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and commented:

... in the case of environmental issues, which can be so vast and complex ... information and knowledge alone can leave people wondering what this all means to them, and without a clear sense of what concrete steps they can take. To counter such feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, education should encourage understanding of the ways that environmental problems intimately connect to our daily lives. Education must also inspire the faith that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale.¹⁹

While in some more extreme approaches to ecology, human beings are perceived as unwelcome parasites causing nothing but damage to the Earth and other forms of life, SGI’s outlook is that responsible and awakened human beings committed to creating positive value are the most promising protagonists of change.

This positive perspective was reiterated in the proposal Mr. Ikeda authored last year on the occasion of the Rio Plus 20 Summit.

Although physical resources are finite, human potential is infinite, as is our capacity to create value. The real significance of sustainability is ... as a dynamic concept in which there is a striving or competition to generate positive value and share it with the world and with the future.²⁰

A German SGI member working in Namibia in the field of fisheries management echoes this perspective in her comments on how becoming

a Buddhist has directly influenced her approach to her work:

Western thought tends to regard human beings and nature as separate—to the extent that some believe that human beings are bad for nature. In contrast, Buddhism regards life and its environment as deeply interconnected. . . . For me, the Buddhist concept of the oneness of self and the environment and the notion that nothing can exist in isolation provide the philosophical basis for my research toward a holistic approach to fisheries management that can help bring human society back into harmony with nature (Barbara Paterson, Namibia).²¹

Education for Sustainable Development

As well as its activities based on promoting better understanding of the historical and theoretical background of Buddhism, SGI has consistently carried out public education and awareness-raising activities often centered around exhibitions.

These have often originated in support of UN initiatives. At the time of the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, SGI Brazil hosted an exhibition titled “The Amazon—Its Environment and Development” which was eventually seen by 700,000 people across Latin America.

In 2001, based on a proposal from SGI President Ikeda and in partnership with other NGOs, Soka Gakkai representatives put forward the idea for a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development to a Japanese NGO forum meeting prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002.

In 2002, for the WSSD, SGI also created a film called “A Quiet Revolution” and an exhibition “Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential” in partnership with the Earth Charter. The key approach taken in our educational tools is to make the issue real and yet not overwhelming. We use the formula “Learn, Reflect, Empower” and ensure that the last section of any exhibition shares examples of so-called ordinary individuals who have succeeded in taking action for change, in line with our core belief that one individual can definitely make a difference.

In our latest exhibition, “Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change,” created jointly with the Earth Charter International, out of 24 panels, 8 spotlight individuals who have taken action to initiate change. Some of these are individuals who are already well-known, such as Wangari Maathai or Hazel Henderson, and others are closer to home examples.

SGI is active at several different levels in terms of contributing to

sustainability. We have UN liaison offices where our representatives contribute to global discussions and debates on, for example, the new sustainable development goals that may be part of the Post-2015 Agenda.

We also have national level initiatives in many countries, from tree planting to training of teachers. In an initiative that grew out of the first Earth Charter events held there in 2000, SGI Malaysia has recycling activities, clean-ups, and a whole month of local activities aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues and the need for personal responsibility in April every year. In Brazil, we have very extensive activities related to sustainability.

Most visible of these is the Amazon Ecological Conservation Center near Manaus which was opened in 1993. The Center has restored degraded areas of forest, with the emphasis on planting methods that enable the human population and the forest to coexist, and it runs extensive programs of environmental education. It also works with local indigenous communities to help them develop their own livelihoods in sustainable ways.

Brazil-SGI (BSGI) also promotes school garden projects and recycling activities with public school teachers and students' parents as part of the Makiguchi Education Action program created by its Education Department. This has reached approximately 300 schools in several Brazilian cities.

At the local level in many countries we are often engaged in tree planting, cleaning up parks in towns, villages and so on.

SGI and the Earth Charter

SGI works with various partners at different local, national and international levels. One partnership that has now been ongoing for nearly 15 years is one with the Earth Charter movement. The Earth Charter provides a universal expression of ethical principles to foster sustainable development, and its values are entirely consonant with our own.

This partnership has been a very beneficial one, in that it has brought us new encounters with like-minded individuals and groups. Importantly, it has also enabled us to communicate what values we adhere to in language that is universal and not specifically Buddhist.

The SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center (subsequently renamed the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue) held a series of consultations on the draft text and SGI-USA also held such consultations.

As the Earth Charter text was being finalized through dialogue in the late 1990s, there was a concern that it was not attracting much attention in Asia, and Earth Charter Commissioner Mikhail Gorbachev requested SGI to become involved in raising awareness of the Charter through our large existing grassroots network in Asia.

There is considerable resonance between the Earth Charter's message and the basic outlook or philosophy of SGI as expressed in the SGI Charter. Its poetic and deeply spiritual expression of human responsibility and agency, interconnectedness and global outlook fits exactly with our own approach.

Mr. Ikeda has consistently promoted the Earth Charter in his annual peace proposals, for instance in 2002, stating:

The Earth Charter is not limited in its concerns to environmental issues but contains important language related to social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace. In this sense, it is a comprehensive statement of the norms and values required for effective global governance. It may be considered a guideline for humanity in the twenty-first century.²²

Some individual SGI members have been so inspired by the message of the Earth Charter that they became deeply engaged, initiating their own projects and even their own civil society organizations or NGOs inspired by its message.

Overall, however, where I believe we are contributing most to sustainability is through our individual members and their contributions in their communities and their workplaces. This is where the philosophy of SGI becomes a reality.

Here I would like to try to summarize the process of change that some individuals undergo as a result of applying their daily practice and the values of Buddhism as taught within SGI.

I feel that the individual efforts of our members directly exemplify "human revolution" in action—the never-ending process of growth and development of the Greater Self on which SGI members ideally embark through their practice.

An SGI-UK member now working to prevent illegal logging describes this process:

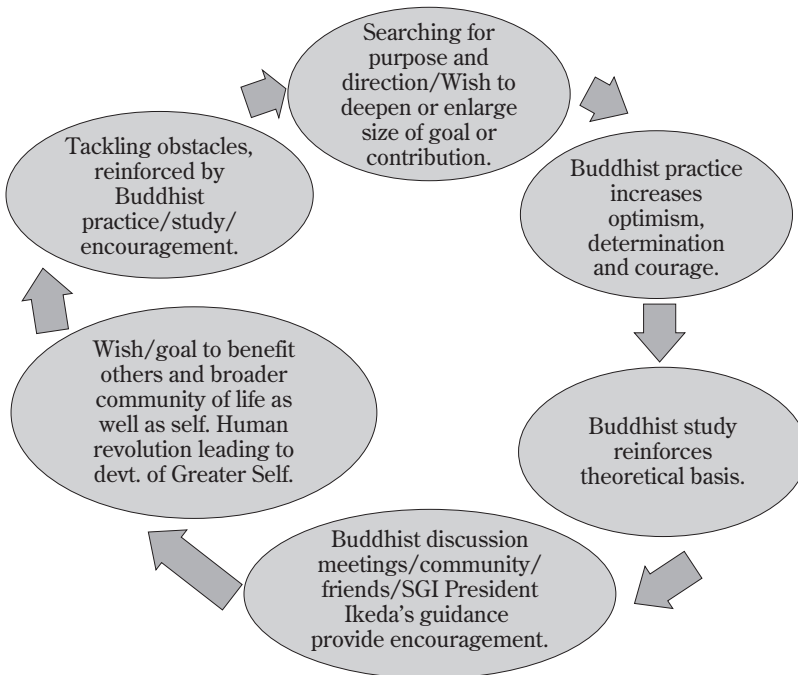
I knew that change had to start from me. I began to develop the attitude that my life isn't just about surviving or solving problems that arise, it's about taking a proactive approach to life, where I set out to do

something and continue come what may, focusing all the time on my long-term aims, seeing setbacks in their longer-term context (Julie Bygraves, UK).²³

This is described in the book *Chanting in the Hillsides: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in Wales and the Borders* by Jeaneane and Merv Fowler as follows: “Enlightenment in Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism is not the suspension of desires, but *involvement* in the world, engaged living—in the true spirit of the *bodhisattvas* of Mahayana Buddhism. It is those who can experience their greater selves who can effectuate greater global peace and harmony....”²⁴

Case Studies of Individual Members

I analyzed the 15 accounts we have on the SGI website under the “members’ stories” section in the category of sustainability at <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories.html?category=Sustainability>, some of which have been quoted above.



Journey of typical SGI member engaged in sustainable development

Reading through them, I was struck by some common elements, which I have tried to list in the table here. This exercise sheds some light on how, within SGI, individual practitioners tend to become increasingly involved in contribution as their practice goes on.

The common threads of the stories are as follows:

- Initial lack of clarity over direction
- Lack of belief in oneself and the possibility of being able to make a difference
- Start of application of Buddhist practice and study
- Challenging own circumstances
- Broadening compassion and feeling of connection with or responsibility for the environment
- Beginning of hope/dream involving something to do with protecting environment and contributing to community
- Realization that change has to start from within oneself
- Gradually overcoming sense of own powerlessness
- Study/training
- Starting local/with challenge in front of one
- Inspiration from Buddhist words and practice
- Encountering obstacles on the way
- Drawing on encouragement from other SGI members, Buddhist principles and SGI President Ikeda's guidance
- Deepening one's determination to contribute
- Increasing size of one's dream/goal
- Continuing this process of increasing the size of one's contribution indefinitely, inspired by Buddhist practice, study and guidance/support from other SGI members

These are all individual journeys from poverty and disempowerment to empowerment, contribution and concern. They illustrate determination to take responsibility and refusal to give up hope, in spite of setbacks and circumstances which can be very daunting. All exemplify the "spirit of challenge."

This is where the real legacy of Nichiren and the founding presidents of Soka Gakkai and SGI is to be found.

NOTES

- ¹ Carlos Rubio, "A Spirit of Challenge," *SGI Quarterly* (Jan 2014), p. 4.
- ² *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (WND), Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), p. 852.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁴ Philip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 130.
- ⁵ WND, Vol.1, p. 4.
- ⁶ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/change-begins-within-myself.html>
- ⁷ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/my-small-step.html>
- ⁸ *The Human Revolution :Book One volumes 1–6* (Santa Monica, California: World Tribune Press, 2004),viii.
- ⁹ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/an-inextricable-connection.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/planning-for-a-city-a-buddhist-perspective.html>
- ¹¹ Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *A Geography of Human Life*, ed. Dayle M. Bethel (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 2002), p. 11.
- ¹² Andrew Gebert and Monte Joffee, "Value Creation as the Aim of Education: Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Soka Education" in *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2007), p. 68.
- ¹³ *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Zenshu* [The Complete Works of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi]. Vol. 5 (Tokyo: Daisan Bunmeisha, 1981–96), p. 356.
- ¹⁴ WND, Vol.1, p. 851.
- ¹⁵ "Earth Charter," <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>
- ¹⁶ Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 143.
- ¹⁷ P. Hammond and D. Machacek, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- ¹⁸ Daisaku Ikeda, "The Environmental Problem and Buddhism," *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 3 (1990), p.8.
- ¹⁹ "The Challenge of Global Empowerment: Education for a Sustainable Future," <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals/environmental-proposal.html>
- ²⁰ "For a Sustainable Global Society: Learning for Empowerment and Leadership," <http://www.sgi.org/assets/pdf/environmentproposal2012.pdf>
- ²¹ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/conserving-the-benguelas-abundance.html>
- ²² "The Humanism of the Middle Way: Dawn of a Global Civilization," <http://www.sgi.org/assets/pdf/peace2002.pdf>
- ²³ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/top-20/a-piece-of-ourselves.html>
- ²⁴ Jeaneane Fowler and Merv Fowler, *Chanting in the Hillsides: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in Wales and the Borders* (Eastbourne and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p. 81.

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