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**The Scriptural Foundation of Music in Vaiṣṇava Theology  
and its Practical Implementation Exemplified  
in the Temple Music Tradition of Vraja**

I know not how thou singest, my master!

I ever listen in silent amazement.

The light of thy music illuminates the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on. My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled. Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gītāñjalī*, III

Music is known and accepted by many religions as a phenomenon that inherits the energy to invoke and unite the positive vibrations of the universe. Its communicative power is being used effectively in the liturgies to transfer messages between spiritual and phenomenal spheres, between the divine and the mundane realms, between God and man. Music forms an indispensable part of any religious tradition which presupposes a personal relationship between the devotee and God, and musical performances of some kind or other are firmly integrated into the ritual practice of such religions. As a medium of communication, music inherits an expressiveness that reaches far beyond the capacity of verbal expression. Music is by nature non-material inasmuch as it cannot be touched, yet it presupposes the human senses in order to be perceived. Music originates from the phenomenal plane and conveys its message onto the spiritual plane, and vice versa music re-materializes the spiritual responses received from the divine. Thus music, being the most abstract of all art forms, becomes the principal mediator between the spiritual and the phenomenal realms. Translated into the concrete context of religious practice, the functions of music are communication with the divine forces, and expression of the sentiments of religious devotion. The present paper shall consider both these functions of music in their mutual effects. It is intended in the following pages to point at the rôle of music in ritual practice and spontaneous devotional expression as laid down in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the theological foundation of Vaiṣṇavism.

Vaiṣṇavism is the religion dedicated to the worship of Viṣṇu and his two principal incarnations, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, and their consorts. The chief tenet of Vaiṣṇavism is *bhakti*, devotion to God as a personal deity. The word *bhakti* is

derived from a Sanskrit verbal root *bhaj-*, 'to participate' or 'partake', denoting specifically to participate in auspicious events and to partake of the grace of God. The second connotation of *bhaj-* is 'to serve' and 'to love'. *Bhakti* philosophy propagates loving devotion to God and complete self-surrender in divine service. The Vaiṣṇava religion took its birth around the 9th century A.D., when it developed out of the *bhakti* movements that originated in South India during the 6th century A.D. From the outset, the historical development of Vaiṣṇavism has been associated with the advent of musical and poetic traditions to an extent barely found in other religions. The *bhakti* movement was initiated by a group of Dravidian poet-saints known as the Ālvārs, who lived in Tamil Nadu around the 6th century A.D. Their hymns were essentially personal in their expression, stressing the pain felt by the human soul over the separation from God. Rāmānuja (1050–1137) was the first systematic philosopher of *bhakti* who combined the contents of the devotional poetry of the Ālvārs with Upaniṣadic philosophy. The next important philosopher of *bhakti* was Madhva (1197–1280) from Uḍupi in Karnataka, followed by a number of saints who appeared in various parts of India. Many of these saints were concerned with pure *bhakti* rather than with theological and philosophical concepts, and they conveyed their messages through devotional poetry. The literary and poetic tradition of *bhakti* continued with Jayadeva in Orissa in the 12th century, whose Sanskrit lyrical poem *Gīta Govinda* had a large impact on Vaiṣṇava philosophy, followed later on by Nāmadeva in Maharashtra, Sūradāsa and many others in Vraja, Mīrābāi in Rajasthan, and Tulasīdāsa in Banaras.

Regardless its heterogeneity, the vast body of Vaiṣṇava poetry is characterized by the general purport of expressing the poet's personal sentiments in his relationship with God. These emotions range from disappointment at being separated from God (a very popular sentiment among South Indian poets from the Ālvārs to Tyāgarāja in the 18th–19th century) to utmost delight at the vision of God's divine play. While many poems were created out of spontaneous inspiration and immediately resulting from concrete religious feelings, a considerable number of verses were written for usage in the daily ritual service. Such poems describe the daily routine in the life of God as well as the annual cycle of events, and they are intended for musical presentation in the temples and sanctuaries. It is noteworthy that the two-fold functionality of music as ritual worship and devotional expression is reflected in the fact that the poems and songs of *bhakti* were written for liturgical purposes while, at the same time, they were born out of a spontaneous emotion.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the canonical basis of Vaiṣṇava theology, acknowledges the authority of music as part of the divine service and its rôle as a means of expressing devotional ecstasy. Verse 11.19.20 states that 'believing in nectar-like stories of me, incessantly narrating them, to praise me with eulogies in complete knowledge and respect [– all these lead to devotion]'<sup>1</sup>. Once the

<sup>1</sup> *śraddhāmṛta-kathāyāṃ me śaśvan mad-anukīrtanam, pariniṣṭhā ca pūjāyāṃ stutibhiḥ stavanāṃ mama.*

devotee has attained the full state of devotion – possibly by means of evoking the presence of God through hymns and songs of praise – he will express his emotional experience in various ways, including spontaneous singing and dancing: ‘Sometimes they weep because of permanent anxious thoughts about (him), sometimes they feel overpowered and delighted and talk about his transcendental acts. They sing, dance, constantly practise (his service); (attaining) supreme bliss, they remain silent’<sup>2</sup>. Silence remains the ultimate answer, the only medium of communication with the divine, the only form of prayer whose power exceeds that of music; the supreme expression of eternity, of bliss: ‘I shall tune it to the notes of forever, and when it has sobbed out its last utterance, lay down my silent harp at the feet of the silent’ (Tagore 1931). The devotee who, out of his sentiments for God, bursts into song is considered to be gifted with superior qualities: ‘He whose words are stammered and whose heart melts, who weeps again and again and laughs at times; who, doing away with all bashfulness, sings aloud and dances, endowed with my devotion – such a person purifies the world’<sup>3</sup>.

The assignment of music to act as a medium to express devotion and love for God is reflected in practical religious life in manifold ways. Music and singing have been the principal mode of worship in the Vaiṣṇava tradition from its very beginnings. During the 16th century, the practice of devotional music to articulate religious sentiments reached one of its high points with the *saṁkīrtana* movement initiated and propagated by Śrī Caitanya and the Bengali Vaiṣṇavas. Rabindranath Tagore comments on this movement: ‘The ineffable mystery of God’s love–call...inspired activity in music that overflowed the restrictions of classical conventionalism. Our *kīrtan* music of Bengal came to its being like a star flung up by a burning whirlpool of emotion in the heart of a whole people’ (ibid.: 140). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (11.5.32 and 11.5.36) promulgates *saṁkīrtana*, congregational singing, as the primary form of worship during the Kali age. The high significance attributed to *saṁkīrtana* in this treatise is unequivocally confirmed in its concluding statement (*BhP*.12.13.23): ‘I bow to that Supreme Hari, glorification and incessant repetition (*saṁkīrtana*) of whose name destroys all evil, and respectful salutation to whom removes all pain’<sup>4</sup>. Sentiments of religious devotion, however, find their musical expression not only in pre-arranged or semi-organized activities such as the *saṁkīrtana* movement, but in impetuous outbursts of excitement, too, reflected in spontaneous singing in temples at the sight of the deity, and in the joy and ecstasy that arise in the course of temple music performances and at religious festivals. Svāmī Fatekrishna

<sup>2</sup> *BhP*.11.3.32: *kvacid rudanty acyuta–cintayā kvacid dhasanti nandanti vadanty alaukikāḥ, nṛtyanti gāyanty anuśīlayanty ajaṁ bhavanti tūṣṇīm param etya nirvṛtāḥ*.

<sup>3</sup> *BhP*.11.14.24: *vāg gadgadā dravate yasya cittam rudaty abhikṣṇam hasati kvacic ca, vilajja udgāyati nṛtyate ca mad–bhakti–yukto bhuvanam punāti*.

<sup>4</sup> *nāma–saṁkīrtanam yasya sarva–pāpa–praṇāśanam, praṇāmo duḥkha–śamanas–tam namāmi harim param*.

Sharma, one of the leading performers of *rāsālīlā* theatre in Vraja, describes the feeling of receiving such divine inspiration: ‘...all the cowherd women are playing musical instruments while the Lord is dancing. Then, when the emotion arises while I take their vision, I may feel like adding my own songs’ (interview, quoted in Thielemann, in the press). The desire to express one’s religious fervour in song is a common phenomenon in human life, which is shared by all traditions of devotional religion. The Bāuls of Bengal and the Sūfī saints belong to the exponents of spontaneous devotional singing as much as do the Vaiṣṇava poet-musicians from all parts of India.

In its function as a means of communication with the divine energies, music is firmly integrated in the liturgies of most, if not all, religions. Its capacity to invoke God acts at the basis of all forms of ritual music, be it Vedic chant, Christian church music, Buddhist ritual chant or the Islamic prayer call, and it persists regardless different attitudes towards music shown by the respective religious traditions on the ground of social implications. The concrete position that music occupies in ritual depends upon theological concepts. If the link between the devotee and God is defined by a relationship based on awe and veneration, as for example in the Vedic religion, music is chosen as a ritual tool for the sake of its power to communicate with the unseen forces of the universe and to make them positively inclined towards the humans. In the tradition of devotional religion, on the other hand, music serves as a vehicle to evoke particular sentiments towards God, as Svāmī Fatekrishna Sharma explains: ‘It is necessary to tie an emotional bond between God and ourselves, just as if God were my child, or as if God were my husband, or as if the Lord were my brother – in this way, by establishing a relationship of the heart, it is given its shape’ (ibid.). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (see below for quotations) provides specific indications for the ritual performance of music, dance, recitation and scenic enactment of divine deeds.

The practical implementation of the instructions laid down scripturally in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is exemplified in the tradition of congregational singing in the Vaiṣṇava temples of Vraja. This type of temple music is known as *samājagāyana* (frequently shortened *samāja*), literally ‘congregational’ or ‘group singing’. The region of Vraja in northwestern Uttar Pradesh, centered around the temple towns of Mathura and Vrindaban, is one of India’s foremost pilgrimage centres for Kṛṣṇaite Vaiṣṇavas. Being the birthplace of Lord Kṛṣṇa, Vraja represents the legendary locality associated with the childhood games and pastimes of this deity. A large number of Vaiṣṇava saints from all over India felt attracted by the land of Vraja, and the area gained cultural significance from the 16th century onwards when Caitanya and his followers identified and re-established the site now known as Vrindaban. Vraja derives much of its popularity from the literary weight of its language, Vrajabhāṣā, a dialect of Hindi that represents the foremost language of devotional literature in northern India and the principal dialect used in North Indian classical music. The vast amount of devotional poetry in Vrajabhāṣā that came into existence in the course of approximately the past five centuries constitutes the basic repertoire for the



congregational music performances in the temples of Vraja. The central figure in every *samāja* performance is the lead singer who selects the verses to be presented and introduces them line by line. The lead singer is joined by a chorus of five to ten musicians; they repeat the verse lines first rendered by him and provide also the instrumental accompaniment of the performance: harmonium and a number of other instruments such as *sāraṅgī* (bowed lute) and flute to support the melody, a pair of small cymbals called *mañjīrā*, *jhāñjha* or *kinnarī* to indicate the metric beat, and the double-conical wooden barrel-drum *pakhāvaja* or *mṛdaṅga* to provide rhythmic accompaniment.

Since the poetic word and its sacred content are of utmost significance, the verses are always sung in full regardless their length. As the term *samājagāyana* suggests, the quintessence of Vaiṣṇava temple music is song; pure instrumental music is performed rarely, if at all. The accompanying instruments, however, are definitely required by and firmly integrated into the temple music performance: 'The set of musical instruments is but the adornment of the mind's expression of inner feelings. When pleasure dwells within the heart, or some sentiment for God rises, then, by singing an appropriate verse, a spark flashes from the heart onto the mind. These (instruments) assist the spark, through them it becomes sanctified' (ibid.). The relevance of instrumental music is made explicit in verse 11.11.36 of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The modes of worship listed in this verse include

*maj-janma-karma-kathanam mama parvānumodanam,  
gīta-tāṇḍava- vāditra-goṣṭhībhir mad-grhotsavaḥ*

(to recite) pleasing stories of me and my incarnations and deeds, (to celebrate) festivals in my temple with song, dance, instrumental music (or: musical performances) and discourses.

The term *vāditra* has two connotations: it refers either to a musical instrument and to instrumental music in a broader sense, or to a musical performance in general. The present context, in which *vāditra* is mentioned along with *gīta* (song, singing), *tāṇḍava* (dance, dancing) and *goṣṭha* (conversation, discourse) suggests the translation of *vāditra* as 'instrumental music' as opposed to vocal music (*gīta*). Actual music practice supports an interpretation of *vāditra* as instrumental music to accompany singing rather than pure instrumental music: *gīta-tāṇḍava-vāditra-goṣṭhībhir* thus refers to 'musical performances comprising song, dance, instrumental music and discourses'. The most important component of a musical performance in a Vaiṣṇava temple is song, and of the song, the principal component is its words that are composed in praise of God. Instrumental music is represented by the accompanying instruments that serve to enhance the effect of the sung melody and to amplify the strength of the poetic word. The passage quoted above gives clear indications for the setting of musical performances and states further that such performances are to be held in the temple (*grha*) in order to celebrate festivals (*utsava*).

While the celebration of festivals is given special weight in Vaiṣṇava ritual

practice, the presentation of music and dance is ascribed a fixed place in every-day worship: 'On festive days or every day, massaging with unctuous substances, cleaning the teeth and bathing (should be performed); food (should be offered) and song and dance (should be presented)'<sup>5</sup>. Daily ritual worship (*aṣṭayāma sevā*) in Vaiṣṇava temples follows the division of the day into eight watches (*aṣṭayāma*). The poetic repertoires compiled in the textbooks or *pada saṁgrahas* ('verse collections') of the temples contain verses for each of the eight respective periods of the day. The musical compositions are set to specific melody types (*rāgas*) associated with the proper hours at which the verses are to be sung. The *rāgas* evoke particular sentiments expressed in the verses 'such as the awakening of Lord Kṛṣṇa – when mother Yaśodā awakens her son, she wakes him up from his slumber with a verse expressing excessive fondness. While she awakens him with such an emotion, the situation calls for some morning *rāga* to be rendered' (ibid.). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in chapter 3 of the 11th book, provides yet more detailed instructions for the performance of ritual worship, including singing of hymns in praise of God: '(One should perform the worship of the Lord) inclusive of all his limbs and attendants, (worshipping) each image with its own *mantra* appropriate to it, by means of offering water to wash his feet and for rinsing the mouth etc., bathing and decorating him with cloth ornaments. (One should worship him) with perfumes, flower-garlands, unbroken grains of rice, incenses, light and food offerings. Having greatly honored him with hymns and songs of praise, (one should) bow to the Lord'<sup>6</sup>.

Verses 11.11.36 and 11.27.35 of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (quoted above) mention the presentation of music and song at festival time. The arrangement of festival celebrations in addition to the daily rituals is laid down in yet another passage: 'Individually or together with others (he should arrange), on festive days, processions and great feasts with song, dance etc. as done by mighty kings'<sup>7</sup>. Religious festivals are firmly integrated into the annual ritual sequence of musical performances in the Vaiṣṇava temples of Vraja. In many verse collections, the poetic repertoires are put in order according to the succession of festive events (*varṣotsava*). Annual repertoires are set to appropriate *rāgas* associated with the respective seasons, such as *rāga* Vasanta ('spring') for the spring season, *rāga* Kāfi for the Holī festival, and *rāgas* Megha and Malhāra – both associated with clouds and rains – for the monsoon. Certain musical genres are reserved exclusively for particular seasonal occasions. Thus, the *horī dhamāra*, a repertoire of verses for the Holī celebrations that developed into a separate genre of North Indian classical music, is presented in the temples only at the time of Holī. For

<sup>5</sup> BhP.11.27.35: *abhyāṅgonmardanādarśa-danta-dhāvābhīṣecanam, annādya- gīta-nṛtyāni parvaṇi syur utānv-aham.*

<sup>6</sup> BhP.11.3.52–3: *sāṅgopāṅgām sa-pārśadām tām tām mūrṭim sva- mantrataḥ, pādyārghyācamanīyādyaiḥ snāna-vāso-vibhūṣanaiḥ* (52) *gandha-mālyākṣata-sragbhīr dhūpa-dīpohārakaiḥ, sāṅgam sampūjīya vidhivat stavaiḥ stutvā named dharim* (53).

<sup>7</sup> BhP.11.29.11: *prthak satreṇa vā mahyaṁ parva-yātrā-mahotsavān, kārayed gīta-nṛtyādyair mahārāja-vibhūtibhiḥ.*

the celebration of the autumn full-moon night (*śarada pūrṇimā*), the *pada saṁgrahas* provide songs relating to the *rāsa*, the circular dance performed by Kṛṣṇa with the cowherd women of Vraja during that very night. The event of the *rāsa* is narrated in five chapters of the 10th book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.29.33) referred to as the *Rāsapañcādhyaī*, and the collections of devotional poetry follow this structural division.

Verse 11.27.44 of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* instructs the devotee that 'he should remain for a while, singing before me, invoking me, dancing, enacting my deeds and listening to stories about me'<sup>8</sup>. Besides song and dance, the passage mentions dramatic enactments of the deeds of God among the modes of worship. The theological relevance of this activity is confirmed in another verse (11.11.23) that refers to the ways of devotion: 'listening with faith very auspicious stories about me which purify the world, singing (and) remembering and enacting my deeds and incarnations'<sup>9</sup>. In Vraja, religious drama exists in the form of *rāsalīlā* (from *rāsalīlānukaraṇa*, 'the imitation of the *rāsa* play'). *Rāsalīlā* is an art form that presents poetry, music, dance and acting in a perfect combination. The scenic re-enactment of the *rāsa* dance, the event central to Vaiṣṇava theology, stands in the mid-point of *rāsalīlā* theatre. The performances are structured in two parts: an initial dance (*rāsa*), the invariable and most sacred component, followed by a one-act play which depicts an episode from Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth in Vraja. *Rāsalīlā* is performed by professional troupes called *rāsa-maṇḍalī* consisting of child actors and musicians. The rich collections of devotional poetry in Vrajabhāṣā provide an inexhaustable literary source for all sentiments and situations portrayed in the *rāsalīlā*. The songs are based upon the same verses as those rendered for daily and seasonal worship in the temples; in some cases, even the musical compositions are identical. The songs of *rāsalīlā* are presented in the style of Vaiṣṇava temple music. The central figure in *rāsalīlā* performances is the *svāmī*, the lead singer who is also the proprietor and master of the troupe. He is assisted by one or two vocalists and an accompanying orchestra comprising supporting melody instruments, cymbals and drums. Dramatic enactments of divine deeds form an integral part of religious celebrations at festival time. The major annual occasions for *rāsalīlā* performances to take place are the festivals of Holī, the Indian spring festival, and Janmāṣṭamī, Kṛṣṇa's birth anniversary.

Occasional Sanskrit quotations apart, the language of *rāsalīlā* is Vrajabhāṣā. The promulgation of regional languages and the preferred use of vernaculars in place of Sanskrit as literary languages is one of the characteristics of the Vaiṣṇava tradition from its very beginnings. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* confirms this attitude: '(Eulogizing me) with various praises and hymns found in ancient texts as well as in the current language, he should prostrate himself (before me) with the words

<sup>8</sup> *upagāyan gr̥ṇan nṛtyan karmāṇy abhinayan mama, mat-kathāḥ śrāvayan śṛṇvan muhūrtam kṣaṇiko bhavet.*

<sup>9</sup> *śraddhalūr mat-kathāḥ śṛṇvan su-bhadrā loka-pāvanīḥ, gāyann anusmaran karma janma cābhinayan muhuḥ.*

‘may you be gracious unto me, o Lord’<sup>10</sup>. The preference given to local languages resulted in the rich traditions of Vaiṣṇava devotional literature in these languages. The earliest poet-saints of *bhakti*, the Ālvārs, gave their emotional outpourings concrete form in beautiful Tamil verses. The tradition continued with poetry in Telugu and other Dravidian languages and, as the *bhakti* movement spread subsequently towards north, in Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali and other languages. The foundation of Vrajabhāṣā devotional poetry was laid during the 15th and 16th centuries with the poetic works of Svāmī Haridāsa, Sūradāsa, Hita Harivaṁśa and others. Most Vaiṣṇava communities represented in Vraja base their temple songs on verses in Vrajabhāṣā, sometimes alongwith another local language such as Bengali in case of the Caitanyite Vaiṣṇavas. Verses in Sanskrit do exist, but they are of minor occurrence.

The superiority of music over other forms of ritual worship and religious practices is confirmed in Vaiṣṇava theology and is reflected in devotional poetry. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* advocates congregational singing (*saṁkīrtana*) as the principal method of worship and the primary way that leads towards liberation in the Kali age: ‘(In the age of Kali) intelligent persons, through sacrifices (consisting of) frequently practising congregational chanting (*saṁkīrtana*), worship the Lord of dark complexion (but) brilliant in lustre, accompanied by his associates, weapons and attendants’<sup>11</sup>. ‘Noble persons who see into the core of things and appreciate their good qualities praise the Kali Age, in which all worthy ends are obtained only through congregational singing (*saṁkīrtana*)’<sup>12</sup>. The poet-saints of Vraja did not hesitate to take up and dwell upon this concept of ‘singing to the Lord’ as the principal duty of man in their verses admonishing the human mind. Thus, Sūradāsa concludes many poems with the words *bhagavāna bhajana binu*, ‘without singing to the Lord...’, as in the following verse (*Sūra Sāgara* 259):

O man, you are foolishly wasting this life of yours;  
swelling with pride and cherishing greed, you have not sought shelter in the dark one;  
this world is like the cotton (fruit), the parrot was charmed as it looked beautiful to him;  
cotton was scattered as he tried it, he could not catch hold of anything;  
why now repent the sins committed before;  
Sūra says without singing the praises of God, the head is obsessed with remorse<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> BhP.11.27.45: *stavair uccāvacaīḥ stotrāiḥ paurāṇaiḥ prākṛtair api, stutvā prasīda bhagavann itī vandeta daṇḍa-vat*.

<sup>11</sup> BhP.11.5.32: *kṛṣṇa-varṇaṁ tvīṣākṛṣṇaṁ sāṅgopāṅgāstra-pārśadam, yajñaiḥ saṁkīrtana-prayair yajanti hi sumedhasaḥ*.

<sup>12</sup> BhP.11.5.36: *kalīm sabhājayanty ārya guṇa-jñāḥ sāra-bhāginah, yatra saṁkīrtanaenaiva sarva-svārtho ‘bhilabhyate*.

<sup>13</sup> *re mana mūrakha janama gāvāyo / kari abhimāna biṣaya rasa gīdhyo syāma sarana nahī āyo / yaha saṁsāra suvā semara jyo sundara dekhi lubhāyo / cākhana lāgyo rūḡ gaī urī hātha kachū nahī āyo / kahā hota aba ke pachitāṇ pahilāṇ pāpa kamāyo / kahata sūra bagavanta bhajana binu sira dhuni dhuni pachitāyo //*

The verse is directed towards human consciousness; it addresses the devotee's mind, reminding him that all tasks performed for the sake of material gain are bound to become useless; only selfless devotion to God will lead to true bliss. Singing, being the most immediate and most spontaneous expression of religious devotion, is at the same time also the primary means to evoke the devotional sentiments. Since devotion, *bhakti*, is the core principle of Vaiṣṇavism, singing is automatically being called for as the central element of the divine service, and it is music that accompanies the devotee throughout his journey towards union with the Lord:

It has fallen upon me, the service of thy singer.

In my songs I have voiced thy spring flowers, and given rhythm to thy rustling leaves.

I have sung into the hush of thy night and peace of thy morning.

The thrill of the first summer rains has passed into my tunes, and the waving of the autumn harvest.

Let not my song cease at last, my Master, when thou breakest my heart to come into my house, but let it burst into thy welcome (Tagore 1918: LXXIV).

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