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# Sensemaking and spirituality: the process of re-centring self-decentralisation at work

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores sensemaking as grounded in identity construction in the context of workplace spirituality to uncover how individuals make sense of the process of self-decentralisation. The paper adopts the Buddhist notion of non-self as an analytical tool to explore how Buddhist practitioners in organisational contexts ‘empty out’ and de-centre the self in constructing and negotiating self-identity in the workplace. Through 104 interviews with both executives and employees who are Buddhist practitioners, the study reveals a phenomenon of re-centring self-decentralisation emerging in the pursuit of self-decentralisation. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of work in the context of a spiritual practice and highlight practical implications for HRM practices to manage dynamic interpretations and enactments of spiritual practices in organisations.

## KEYWORDS

Non-self;  
sensemaking;  
workplace spirituality;  
engaged Buddhism;  
empty speech;  
full speech

## Introduction

The scholarship of international Human Resource Management (HRM) explores how culture-specific value sets can influence individuals’ perceptions and interpretations of the work context, shaping their expectations, goals, beliefs and behaviours (e.g. Bakar et al., 2018; Bu & McKeen, 2001; Lange et al., 2010). Different spiritual traditions and practices can enable the expression of values that have strong implications for the field of HRM (e.g. Armitage, 2018; Koburtay & Haloub, 2020; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009). For instance, Islamic management principles can contribute to the development of best management

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Mai C. Vu. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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practices in Arab and Islamic countries, such as the promotion of morality and spirituality versus instrumentality in management and a balanced diffusion of Western and Islamic management principles (Branine & Pollard, 2010). Despite awareness of the importance of spirituality for HRM (e.g. Coldwell et al., 2019), there are few relevant studies in HRM research and literature (e.g. Joelle & Coelho, 2019; Koburtay & Haloub, 2020; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000). It remains unclear how individuals operationalise and make sense of spirituality at the individual level in the workplace (McKee et al., 2008) that may potentially influence HRM.

Spirituality reflects cognitive processes that are closely associated with sensemaking (Ganzin et al., 2020), as any sensemaking derives meaning from the beliefs people possess (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Understanding the process of individuals' sensemaking is salient to contextualising HRM practices (e.g. Stokes et al., 2019). Spirituality can reflect an 'empty speech' through an imaginary order of the self/ego (Driver, 2005). However, it is unclear how individuals' sensemaking influences such misidentifications of the self, how to overcome this to achieve 'full speech', and the implications for HRM. On the other hand, mainstream approaches have been criticised for overlooking alternative narratives and critical perspectives of workplace spirituality (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Forray & Stork, 2002; McKee et al., 2008), especially the operationalisation and sensemaking of spiritual practices that can influence management practices (McKee et al., 2008).

In response to the above gaps, and recognising the need to use relevant methodological tools to study workplace spirituality due to its personal, experiential and even supernatural nature (Lund Dean et al., 2003), this study uses sensemaking to explore the application of the Buddhist practice of non-self in the process of self-decentralisation of individuals to reveal experiences of such processes in the workplace for a number of reasons.

First, spirituality is often associated with conceptualising the existence of 'self', in the form of a whole and integrated self (e.g. Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Zhao & Biesta, 2011), to embrace the potential of one's self. However, within Buddhist philosophy, the idea of emptiness claims that all phenomena, including selfhood, are empty of intrinsic existence (Van Gordon et al., 2017) and the self is an illusion, a source of suffering, and a form of obsession (Ho, 1995). The Buddhist notion of non-self rejects self-centralisation and egocentricity because suffering arises from the illusion of a definite self. It emphasises the process of 'decentring the self' to move beyond an individualistic ego (Butts, 1999; Dehler & Welsh, 1994), an aspect which has been under-explored (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2019) in further understanding that

human behaviour may not always reflect self-interest but rather be motivated by normative commitments (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Veetikazhi et al., 2020). Second, the sensemaking processes underlying the activity of self-narration also remain relatively underexplored (Brown et al., 2008; Maclean et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2007). Third, in cross-cultural contexts, differing views of the self and readings of the self are considered a form of cultural intelligence (e.g. Earley & Ang, 2003; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2006), providing a basis for understanding behavioural differences across different cultures to enrich international HRM (e.g. Gahan & Abeysekera, 2009).

Buddhist practitioners in Vietnam were chosen for this study because engaged Buddhism has become a rising phenomenon in this context (Vu, 2021; Vu & Tran, 2021). The study reveals that in the pursuit of self-decentralisation, a phenomenon of re-centring self-decentralisation emerges, which in turn leads to dynamic sensemaking and operationalisation of spiritual practices in organisations. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of work in the context of a spiritual practice (self-decentralisation) and highlight practical implications for reflexive HRM practices to manage dynamic interpretations and enactments of spiritual practices in organisations.

### **Sensemaking and spirituality in organisation context**

Sensemaking is a narrative process (Myers, 2013) through which individuals come to understand the novelty and ambiguity of events (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Organisations and individuals can be viewed both in terms of process and becoming (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Organisations are fluid and dynamic entities (e.g. Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and individuals are products of experience and ongoing sensemaking processes through their growth and maturation within social relations (Ingold, 2000; Maclean et al., 2012) and lived experience (Sonenshein, 2007). Understanding the process of sensemaking is imperative as it facilitates contextualisation through the application of cognitive frames to extract and interpret cues from the enacted environment (Weick, 1995). This is crucial to managerial practice, including HRM (e.g. Skålén et al., 2005; Stokes et al., 2019). For instance, sensemaking facilitates normative and alternative representations of extremes and consequences, contextualising alternative and deeper understanding of resilience in strategic HRM practices (Stokes et al., 2019).

Sensemaking is closely related to the notion of spirituality (e.g. Lips-Wiersma, 2002; McKee et al., 2008; Pratt, 2000). Sensemaking reveals the social-psychological processes involved in understanding, interpreting, enacting or even resisting spirituality in the workplace,

making sense of the sensemaker through whom spirituality is understood and enacted (McKee et al., 2008). Sensemaking can shed light on the underlying assumptions guiding managers' use/misuse of spirituality for the purposes of managerial control and manipulation (Boje, 2008; English et al., 2005; Lips-Wiersma & Nilakant, 2008). Because spirituality can influence individual and organisational vision beyond rational expectations (e.g. Ganzin et al., 2020; Mauksch, 2017), understanding the sensemaking behind the intent to use or practice spirituality is crucial. Notably, most of the literature criticises the misuse of spirituality from a managerial perspective (e.g. Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009); less attention is paid to its misuse by employees, and how this affects their sensemaking in organisations. However, the experience of spiritual practices is ultimately personal and varies in relation to individuals' cognitive, social, emotional characteristics and personal narratives (Stamm, 2006, p. 91), which can manifest in the different levels that employees interpret and (mis)use spiritual practices in organisations.

The process of sensemaking is "fueled by our need as individuals to have an identity and, in particular, an identity that is consistent and positive" since identity is an interactive process, redefined as a result of experiences and contact with others (McKee et al., 2008; p. 184). Factors that influence identity, such as religious/spiritual beliefs, community, or roles associated with retrospective sensemaking (past experiences), shape the plausibility and legitimacy of individuals' actions (McKee et al., 2008). Spirituality is considered a sensemaking device and organising principle that guides individuals' actions (Long & Mills, 2010). Because spiritual practice deeply embeds moral and ethical conceptualisations of self (Zhao & Biesta, 2011), it helps construct a whole and authentic self through embracing and making sense of the idea of bringing a complete self to work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Neal, 1997). Spirituality can be used as an ideology to justify certain actions, such as organisational re-engineering efforts, or for organising knowledge of the self to construct contextualised, individuated self-categories that reflect a particular sensemaking of the world (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007).

However, spirituality can also represent the imaginary order of the ego. In the search for gratification (Driver, 2005), individuals can misidentify the discourse of the ego as the discourse of the true self – known as empty speech (Lacan, 1988), which leads to constructions of a definable and imaginary self (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Brown, 2019; Driver, 2005; Knights & Clarke, 2014) as a whole and authentic self (e.g. Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004, Neal, 1997), and not knowing how to make sense of their misidentification to achieve 'full speech'<sup>1</sup>

(Driver, 2005). In other words, conceptualisations of spirituality that promise to deliver the experience of authentic selfhood are problematic. Driver (2005) argues there is no authentic spiritual self without mis-cognition, and struggles with the spiritual self can create space where individuals learn to liberate from the ego fantasies we often construct in organisations (Arnaud, 2002) since full speech is often found in narratives of fragmentation or failed representations (Žižek, 1989). Organisations exhibit empty speech in the promise of leaving the ego behind by connecting to purposes larger than the self (Dehler & Welsh, 1994), to thereby attain a complete, integrated, or aligned self (e.g. Heaton et al., 2004). However, such promises can lead to the misidentification of an imaginary authentic self that the ego constructs in the form of an alienated reflection (Driver, 2005; Muller & Richardson, 1982). For instance, individuals may pursue ‘images’ and seek the ‘existence-confirming recognition’ promised by managerial and organisational spirituality (Driver, 2005; Hoedemaekers, 2009), reflecting a discourse that represents the ego’s desire for fulfillment through identifying a self that is integrated and whole (Driver, 2005). Understanding how misconceptions of the self are deconstructed within individual spiritual experiences and how this informs authenticity is essential to HRM that can facilitate the co-creation of authenticity and credibility in organisations (Gill et al., 2018). This is especially true in cross-cultural contexts, where, for example, authenticity remains less important than societal values in collectivist cultures (e.g. Pekerti & Thomas, 2003) in contrast to individualistic ones (e.g. Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010). Spiritual practices also reflect a journey of transformation through learning and personal growth by enabling the expression of values and normative commitments (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009; Vu & Burton, 2020) that can inspire human resource development (HRD) practices (e.g. Kuchinke, 2013). In Islamic contexts for instance, HRD involves spiritual development and Islam-inspired HRM based on the five Islamic pillars of obligation (faith, prayers, fasting, Zakat, and Hajj) (e.g. Kahn & Sheikh, 2012).

Having said that, the sensemaking process underlying self-narration remains under-explored (Brown et al., 2008; Maclean et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2007), particularly in relation to spirituality and the process of agentic interventions and justifications that can potentially trap individuals in misconceptions of the self. The sensemaking process of the ‘self’ enables individuals to understand what is happening within themselves and HRM systems to align practices to employees’ perspectives (Ferris et al., 1998) – since the individual is the basic unit of analysis underpinning many HRM practices designed to motivate individuals (Townley, 1993).

## **Buddhist interpretations of self-identity: The theory of emptiness and non-self**

In Buddhism, there is a metaphysical position that denies the ontological reality of the self (Ho, 1995). Emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*, Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) is a fundamental Buddhist teaching whereby all phenomena, including the 'self', are 'empty' of intrinsic existence (Thich, 1999). Emptiness represents the concept that nothing exists forever, and "the notion of having a personal self with any fixity is an illusion" (Schuyler, 2012, p. 6). Emptiness does not literally mean that nothing exists, but rather that things are subject to change based on the understanding of impermanence and dependent-arising (e.g. the interdependent nature of all phenomena). The theory of emptiness in Buddhism somewhat resembles the Lacanian perspective of the self in that the 'self' is imaginarily constructed, capturing the individual in an illusion or fantasy constructed to overcome a lack of being. Non-self in Buddhism is a vehicle for understanding Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology (Garfield, 1994).

Understanding the sensemaking process underlying the practice of non-self and emptiness attends to a number of concerns in sensemaking. For instance, the temporal and impermanent nature of non-self and emptiness addresses the need to further explore temporality, immanent sensemaking, or embodied sensemaking (e.g. Introna, 2019; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) towards developing a notion of sensemaking that is de-centred (not simply at the disposal of human subjects). The interpenetrating flow of temporality, where sense is given and made simultaneously (Introna, 2019), takes into consideration the broader institutional context and cultures where sensemaking happens (Weber & Glynn, 2006; O'Leary & Chia, 2007), and the interplay between prospective and retrospective aspects of sensemaking (Introna, 2019) that can inform the contextualisation of HRM (Cooke, 2018; Jackson et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2015).

In the field of international HRM, studies have shown how the Buddhist notion of the Middle Way, which eschews extremism and one-sided perspectives, is influencing Thai management practices (Kamoche, 2000), promoting a non-extreme management approach in Vietnam (Vu & Tran, 2021), and also evident in the intertwined formal and informal rules found in Eastern Asian contexts (e.g. employee loyalty is a fundamental characteristic of Korean management, and social capital is built on personalised trust) (Yang & Horak, 2019). However, there have been calls for further studies to explore how the Buddhist concept of impermanence can de-mobilise employees and affect commitment levels in organisations (Kamoche, 2000, p. 456). Impermanence is embedded in the notion of non-self and while non-self is an important



Buddhist practice, it has not received the attention it deserves in HRM. Within management research, only a few studies examine how non-self facilitates a proactive personality in constructing meaning at work, or how non-self can be applied in leadership approaches and practices (Chu & Vu, 2021; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Swierczek & Jousse, 2014; Vu, 2021; Vu & Burton, 2021). Further examination of the sensemaking and unpacking process of non-self could contribute to HRD because learning is not just about the accumulation of skills – it is the process of becoming and understanding who we are that shapes individuals' reactions and adaptability at work (Van Woerkom, 2004).

## Research context

The study was conducted in the transitional context of Vietnam, a country that has been undergoing market transition from a closed to open economy (Zhu et al., 2007) since the 6th Vietnamese Communist Party Congress adopted the renovation policy known as 'Đổi Mới' in 1986. However, the accompanying restructuring of the legal system has resulted in poor-functioning markets with ineffective laws and enforcement contributing to increasing levels of corruption and political turmoil (Cuadra et al., 2010). As a formal institution, weak legal systems have failed to support social trust in Vietnam and engaged Buddhism has emerged as a rising phenomenon (Vu & Tran, 2021) to become a substitutive informal institution (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), influencing the way people enact Buddhist philosophies to make sense of their motives and behaviours. In the scope of this study, engaged Buddhism is not characterised as activism towards social change (Cozort & Shields, 2018) to address contemporary sufferings due to social, political, economic or environmental issues (Thich, 1998), but rather the application of Buddhist philosophies and practices to sensemaking of how this plays out in organisational contexts (Main & Lai, 2013). Examining the application of Buddhist practices (e.g. non-self) in the context of Vietnam can contribute to understanding of how workplaces as a source for spiritual support (e.g. Cooke, 2018; Cooke et al., 2017) can encompass value and belief systems conceptually related to HRM philosophies (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Jackson et al., 2014), and influence individuals' acceptance of work-life patterns that in turn affect HRM practices.

## Methodology

The study took place in Vietnam over two phases from 2016 until the end of 2019. In the first phase, face-to-face interviews were carried out with senior executives from different industries, while employees



reporting to the executive participants were interviewed in the second phase. Buddhist practitioners were selected to explore their sensemaking of the application of the practice of non-self in self-decentralisation in the workplace. Respondents were gathered through snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling was used to make sure the selected sample covered the 24–60 age range with different experience and mastery levels, so as to facilitate exploration of variations in dynamics of practice. Some studies suggest that maturity in practising spirituality such as Buddhism has an important impact on how practitioners make sense of their actions (e.g. Vu & Gill, 2019; Vu, 2020). The sample consisted of 41 executives and 66 employees. Respondents are identified in the paper by a reference number and company code, e.g. ExCy for executives and SxCy for staff/employees (Table 1).

The study employed the narrative inquiry method to elicit respondents' personal narratives of their experiences and sensemaking of self-decentralisation. The foundational assumption guiding narrative inquiry is that narrative is an essential form of communication, allowing people to ascribe meaning to their experiences (Seidman, 2013) through a process of listening to, constructing, and reconstructing stories about the depth and breadth of human experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013). A narrative approach allows participants to share narratives of the self and creates opportunities to make sense of experience for themselves (Mueller, 2019) and reflect reflexively on them (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Participants were invited to recount their knowledge of non-self across a range of situations and given reflexive time to explain their particular way of using special Buddhist language (if any) in their practice. Vietnam is a high-context culture, where distinctive ways of using language/norms can represent various interpretations and meanings. The narrative approach thus helped recognise such complex interpretations, since the analysis of linguistic practices is key to understanding social and power relations (Fairclough, 1995). For instance, participants' expression of self-decentralisation may have been influenced not only by the different power relations in their different roles or their personal experiences of Buddhist practice, but also by the collective culture of face-saving and indirectness embedded in the strong relationship-based and interpersonal connections prevalent in the Vietnamese context (Baughn et al., 2011). As a result, the concept of non-self could be contextualised in multiple ways since "meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit...but also what is implicit – what is assumed" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11) to uncover the complex, layered and contextually situated reality of the phenomenon under study.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of interviewees.

Reference	Gender	Age Group	Position	No. of respondents	Company Reference	Sector
E1-2	F(1) M(1)	46-60	Executive	2	C1	Import/ Export
S1-2	F(1) M(1)	24-35	Staff	2		
E3	F(1)	36-45	Executive	1	C2	Advertising
S3	F(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E4	M(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C3	Transportation
S4-7	F(3) M(1)	24-35	Staff	4		
E5-6	M(2)	46-60	Executive	2	C4	Construction
S8-12	F(2) M(3)	46-45	Staff	5		
E7-9	F(1) M(2)	46-60	Executive	3	C5	Finance/Investment
S13-16	F(1) M(3)	24-35	Staff	4		
E10-12	F(2) M(1)	46-60	Executive	3	C6	Law Consulting
S17-19	F(3)	36-45	Staff	3		
E13	M(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C7	Manufacture
S20	M(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E14	F(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C8	Pharmaceutical
S21-23	F(1) M(2)	36-45	Staff	3		
E15-16	F(1) M(1)	46-60	Executive	2	C9	Banking/Finance
S24-27	F(2) M(2)	24-45	Staff	4		
E17-18	F(2)	36-60	Executive	2	C10	Education
S28-30	F(1) M(2)	24-45	Staff	3		
E19-20	F(1) M(1)	46-60	Executive	2	C11	Import/Export
S31-33	F(3)	36-45	Staff	3		
E21	F(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C12	Construction
S34	M(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E22	M(1)	35-45	Executive	1	C13	Information Technology
S35	M(1)	24-35	Staff	1	C14	Medical Service
E23-24	F(1) M(1)	35-45	Executive	2		
S36-38	F(2) M(1)	24-35	Staff	3		
E25	F(1)	35-45	Executive	1	C15	Management Consulting
S39	M(1)	24-35	Staff	1	C16	Corporate Training
E26	M(1)	35-60	Executive	1		
S40	F(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E27-29	F(1) M(2)	35-45	Executive	3	C17	Telecommunication
S41-46	F(4) M(2)	24-45	Staff	6		
E30	F(1)	34-45	Executive	1	C18	Wholesale
S47-50	F(1) M(3)	24-35	Staff	4		
E31-32	M(2)	46-60	Executive	2	C19	Banking/Finance
S51-53	F(2) M(1)	24-45	Staff	3		
E33	F(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C20	Education
S54-55	F(1) M(1)	24-35	Staff	2		
E34	M(1)	46-60	Executive	1	C21	Pharmaceutical
S56	F(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E35-36	F(1) M(1)	36-60	Executive	2	C22	Construction
S57-58	F(1) M(1)	24-35	Staff	2		
E37-38	F(1) M(1)	36-45	Executive	2	C23	Real Estate
S59-62	F(3) M(1)	24-35	Staff	4		
E39	M(1)	36-45	Executive	1	C24	Transportation
S63	M(1)	24-35	Staff	1		
E40-41	F(2)	35-46	Executive	2	C25	Hospitality
S64-66	F(2) M(1)	24-35	Staff	3		

Several broad questions were used to open the interview sessions and guide participants to share their experiences of the application of the notion of non-self and how they made sense of such processes within the investigated companies. This was followed by a narrative interview during the actual interview process. Similar to an episodic narrative interview (Mueller, 2019), participants were allowed time to reflect on and examine the transformative elements of their narratives

in their experiences with the phenomenon of non-self. Because personal experiences are embedded in complex social phenomena, the ask-and-answer format of a semi-structured interview would not have been effective as it may have influenced participants' restructuring and recounting of their experiences. The interviews generally lasted 45–60 min and were conducted, recorded and then transcribed in Vietnamese for analysis. Back translation – into English and then back into Vietnamese – was then carried out to ensure the original meaning of the text was not lost or distorted in the process of translation.

During data analysis, the main emerging narratives from the transcripts (e.g. desires, expectations, suffering, etc.) were highlighted and then classified into categories (e.g. pragmatism, selective perception, reduced expectations, etc.). To ensure the analyses covered participants' understanding and narrative on how they constructed and made sense of self-decentralisation, the data were constantly compared with the emerging theoretical structures (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The categories derived from the participants' interpretations (self-decentralisation and re-centring self-decentralisation) were constructed in an inductive process of interaction and integration between theory and empirical data (Putnam, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Similar themes were then linked to overarching dimensions and so an emerging framework was assembled. Comparisons across age and experience in Buddhist practice were also used to examine the impact of experiential understanding on behaviours and feelings (Rosenbaum, 2003) around the process of self-decentralisation – since Buddhist practice is a process of individual transformation through the mastery of skills and experiences (Bodhi, 2011; Vu & Gill, 2019). To avoid bias and misinterpretation of the complex nature of the practice of non-self, a Buddhist scholar was invited to cross-check the coding strategy and data interpretation.

## Findings

Executive and employee interpretations of non-self and their experiences within the process of self-decentralisation are elaborated below. The findings illustrate variations in experiential understanding and the practice of non-self in accordance with participants' experience in mastering Buddhism and managerial/employee perspectives.

### Non-self: Interpretations of self-decentralisation

The way participants defined, experienced and applied non-self varied based on their roles. For executives, the enactment of non-self was associated with their managerial roles:

For me, non-self (*vô ngã*) is decentring the 'self', is leading without having to be a leader or imposing my own ideology on employees that they do not necessarily agree with. (E20C11)

Non-self is the willingness to let go of a self/ego by welcoming and encouraging criticisms and judgments from my subordinates to challenge my management practices. (E32C19)

For employees on the other hand, the practice of non-self was more about coping with the work context by understanding the sources of suffering caused by self-centredness:

For me, the practice of non-self (*vô ngã*) is about decentring my ego by not taking my colleagues or my managers' complaints and criticisms personally. If I take criticisms personally and not professionally because I desire to be praised all the time, that is ignorance and I will suffer from it all the time. (S3C2)

Although participants used the same Buddhist term non-self (*vô ngã*), their interpretation and application of non-self differed. Executives used the practice of non-self to decentralise their leadership ideology and desire to avoid ideological control (e.g. Toraldo et al., 2019), while employees applied non-self to identify and overcome sources of suffering in the workplace caused by self-centred expectations.

However, both executives' and employees' sensemaking of the self were demonstrated through their understandings/practice of non-self:

[...] Having a self is just an illusion based on the practice of non-self [...] as a leader, I tend not to be criticised or challenged so sometimes I'm unaware of my egoistic actions. Non-self is there to remind me. Being respected as a leader and not being criticised because of my leadership power are two very different things. (E4C3)

Once you start to think of your identity, you start thinking of a self and its associated ego, which contradicts with the practice of non-self [...] I work in a team most of the time, I need to remember that there is no 'I' but a 'we' [...] (S23C8)

Such interpretations of the imaginary self and identity are similar to the Lacanian view of the imaginary self, where ideas of the imaginary self are attained by individuals trapped in the '*empty speech*' of ego (Lacan, 1988). The empty speech of ego was described by participants as the inability to deal with letting go of attachments and desires, reflecting ignorance in understanding the truths of Buddhism:

[...] I came to realise that the 'self' does not really exist, it is not a 'thing', it all depends on how I desire it to be or how I want others to acknowledge it. It is a form of attachment to my desires that according to the Noble Truths is ignorance, leading to a form of suffering [...] I suffered from my desire to get everyone to agree with a new advertising campaign, but that cost our company the partnership with a specialist app development team [...] (E28C17)

Participants also explained that the idea of non-self encourages them to let go of *ego-centric desires*:

The less I am obsessed with a 'self', I suffer less. I am less concerned about having to do certain things and especially trying to satisfy my 'self' and my ego [...] It took me a while to learn that it is impossible to please everyone so that I can look good as an employee and benefit from it [...]. (S8C4)

Participants also emphasised how understanding the practice of non-self uncovers the sources of suffering, thus allowing them to *reduce ego-serving expectations*:

With expectations for employees to do what I asked them to do, I always felt that I was waiting and expecting. But with non-self, I considered my expectations as suffering and once I let go of them, it has been a relief. (E34C21)

I used to be obsessed with setting out high expectations to impress my manager and tried too hard to achieve them, which eventually created stress affecting my personal relationships. (S3C2)

Many participants shared that the process of self-decentralisation through the practice of non-self is a painful journey. This was particularly evident in participants with more experience in practicing non-self (over 15 years of practice), mostly in executive roles:

To understand non-self is not something that I have gained easily. I have been practicing rejecting and de-centralising my 'self' and ego for more than 20 years now and still, I make mistakes and find it extremely difficult. It takes painful lessons to realise how unconsciously I come back to my ego [...] my painful experiences have included the loss of a meaningful project and loyal partners and friends along the way. (E33C19)

The painful process shared by participants somewhat resembles 'full speech' (Driver, 2005; Žižek, 1989), whereby individuals resist a stable and defined identity through narratives of fragmentation and even failure, acknowledging the interplay and interconnectedness in the universe:

Buddhism is a practice for fighting against your 'self' and your ignorance, not the external context [...] letting go of relying on my 21 years of leadership experience and learn to be criticised by younger employees has never been easy for me. (E34C21)

So, you become proud because you can deconstruct everything around you, and that is when you are trapped in the so called 'self' [...] Being a Buddhist does not make me more knowledgeable than others but I unconsciously feel that way sometimes and suffer from it. Rejecting that state is why I need non-self to decentre my ego [...] (E23C14)

However, while full speech refers to true subjects or the fleeting discourse of true subjectivity (Driver, 2005), such subjects are also empty in the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness:

Non-self means that there is no self. When I attain a certain consciousness or a certain state of mind, I am also ready to reject it [...] This is how you find fullness and freedom, but even such states of fullness are empty because they are guided by my subjective interpretations [...] this is why I say, all is empty, including the practice of non-self because it means different thing to different people [...] (E20C11)

### **Re-centring self-decentralisation**

In pursuing and seeking to attain the practice of non-self, a process of re-centring self-decentralisation emerged, which was justified by participants' sensemaking.

### ***Externalising consequences with reduced expectations***

Employees in this study claimed that having expectations causes suffering, and therefore they tended to reduce their expectations in the workplace, especially because expectations arise from the impermanent nature of the external context or other agents:

You can never control the external context because sometimes, even if you do something out of good intentions, you are still blamed. For example, I offered my help to stay extra hours after work to help out my colleagues on a project. Unfortunately, the project did not go through but instead of acknowledging my help, they blamed my ideas and involvement. So I understand that expectations come with suffering. (S10C4)

Participants tended to justify their actions based on their understanding of karmic consequences: because they can only control their own actions, as long as those actions are generating good karma, they are fulfilling their Buddhist practice. Such interpretations highlight that the notion of impermanence affected the way respondents externalised actions and consequences, underestimating their own actions and efforts:

As long as I am generating good karma out of my intentions, I think that is good enough. (S22C8)

[...] some say I am reluctant in everything I do, that I don't care about others [...] I don't know, maybe having less expectations [...] makes them feel that I am ignoring them [...] apparently, my team says I'm not motivated enough to motivate myself and others but I don't want to pressure anyone or stress others [...] non-self is truly not easy. (S15C5)

This rationale was also used by executives to justify not taking the blame if their visions failed, because they believed it was beyond them to control stakeholders or the competitive nature of any business:

With fewer expectations, you suffer less because you cannot control your stakeholders. A vision fails because of unexpected conditions such as your competitors

playing dirty or your staff no longer being loyal to you. There's nothing you can do about it and sometimes you just have to accept it [...] I know some employees think that I am not a tough or effective leader, but isn't that how you let go of your expectations and ego to be praised as a leader [...] (E28C17)

It is intriguing to learn that executives responded to their sense of suffering by reducing their expectations and accepting the end result:

As a leader, you lose and you fail and it is OK. I cannot be right all the time because life is impermanent. (E38S23)

These interpretations from both executives and employees reveal how impermanence and non-self in particular, can be used to justify adapting to unfavourable working conditions rather than initiating changes. This is a form of letting go of expectations but without criticality and consideration of possible alternatives, which reflects 'empty speech' in adopting non-self to justify a process of self-decentralisation. While some respondents tended to justify their reluctance as a way of reducing expectations in responding to unmanageable consequences, more experienced practitioners, such as the following respondent with 23 years of experience, clarified the meaning of impermanence in Buddhist practice, and a way to master it:

[...] Trying your best without the fear of suffering due to unwanted results is non-self. Being able to accept and understand impermanence is important, but not enough. Being skilful in responding to it is what I call the wisdom of Buddhist practice. (E34C21)

A skilful treatment of non-self was emphasised, which includes the ability to reject the practice itself in demonstrating 'full speech' for the process of self-decentralisation:

I would say that having good intentions and relying fully on that, regardless of the outcome, is not non-self but self-serving assumptions. It has to be accompanied by skilful observation and action. For example, I find that being critical to colleagues in an effort to give them constructive feedback does not always lead to good outcomes. Some find it offensive and take it personally [...] resulting in damaged relationships [...] so good intentions can be perceived very differently [...] and sometimes need to be rejected. (E14C8)

### ***Selective perception and moral justification***

Respondents' sensemaking of self-decentralisation derived from their selective perceptions and individual justifications of their ways of disseminating the practice of non-self. For instance, employees were hesitant to practice non-self through compassion for fear of being taken advantage of – which they interpreted as ignorance leading to suffering:



I find it hard to practice compassion at work sometimes because people just take advantage of me. [...] I am hesitant to be compassionate with some of my colleagues. (S65C25)

On the other hand, while some employees in the study were opposed to the way executives introduced mindfulness practices, they refrained from criticism, using the justification that they were showing compassion and practising non-self:

My boss is introducing a mindfulness practice which is not suitable for me. We follow different traditions. I do not agree with it but I don't think that it is necessary to question it because I am practicing non-self [...] sometimes I am frustrated but still try hard to accept it [...] I don't want to cause trouble [...] (S35C13)

As interpreted by some employee respondents, non-self was tied to their personal practice, justifications and context, which contradicts the fundamental Buddhist principle of dependent arising to attain fullness and emptiness in Buddhist practice.

Some executives in the study also referred to the sacrifice of personal values in non-ethical actions as one of the challenges of practicing non-self in the process of self-decentralisation. They rationalised such actions as necessary 'offerings' to generate positive karmic consequences for wider stakeholders:

If my action generates positive karma for my employees or my customers but negative karma for myself, I consider it a way of practicing non-self, especially when I have to bribe officials to get project approval. No pain, no gain. That is the essence of all Buddhist practice. (E21C12)

The above example typifies the executives' selective perceptions in interpreting the theories of karma and impermanence to justify their motives and actions. They externalised and reduced expectations and responsibilities as a way of showing their understanding of the impermanent nature of the context. They tended to negotiate their own karmic consequences against wider consequences as a practice of non-self, such as by justifying their non-ethical decision-making as suffering their own karmic consequences for the benefit of others:

When my employees think that I am being opportunistic with competitors, I accept their judgment because as long as I know that my motives are to generate positive karma, there's no need for anyone's approval. I am responsible for my own actions. (E2C1)

Respondents considered that Buddhist practice is an individual practice for personal development based on the individual's contextual circumstances and capabilities. This however takes them right back to their

own 'ego' through failing to recognise the interdependent nature of different contexts and agents.

### **Pragmatism**

Executive participants tended to be selective and cautious in introducing and applying Buddhist principles to support the enactment of non-self in the workplace:

The practice of Buddhism is not for everyone, especially when you do not understand the fundamental reasons for practicing it. For instance, personally I think that laziness is a suffering because if I am lazy at this moment, I will suffer from lots of work later on. But my employees do not think so. If they can be lazy at work, that is a good thing for them. So changing such ideologies is not easy. What I do is try to introduce [...] the practices that I have found helpful and necessary. (E4C3)

As a pragmatic approach, the notion of compassion was the most common practice introduced into the workplace by executives in this study in the process of self-decentralisation. This is because it was well-received by employees and helped in generating a supportive working environment:

We have a 'compassion day' at the company where colleagues are encouraged to help each other out with issues such as flexible working time [...], or raising money for health issues. When you have happy people, everything else comes after that. (E20C11)

[...] it is my duty to do my best to introduce some relevant and useful practices and philosophies if they can help my employees to be happier. Buddhist practice is not just about helping yourself but about helping others so it provides you with knowledge as instruments to do so. Helping others helps and advances me in my practice. (E30C18)

Here, compassion is considered a skilful means, promoting codes of kindness and compassion to secure the trust of employees and enhance interpersonal interaction and cooperation (Hosmer, 2008) to produce positive outcomes for both individuals and the organisation. Using goodwill as an 'instrument' for advancing and progressing their Buddhist journey reflected the ego present in executives' pursuit of Buddhism in a form of 'empty speech' of non-self.

On the other hand, in dealing with difficult stakeholders and challenging situations, executives stressed the importance of mindfulness in facilitating their self-decentralisation approach. For instance:

I am keen on training my employees to be mindful every time they receive a new case. Our company deals with legal issues around corporate cases and our clients are not the most honest and straightforward ones. [...] knowing how to be mindful is therefore crucial. (E11C6)

Executive respondents further clarified that they customised mindfulness practice and training in organisations, rather than imposing egoistic versions of mindfulness practice or considering mindfulness a one-size-fits-all corporate practice (Purser & Loy, 2013).

Mindfulness in our company [...] more about intellectual debates on difficult cases for learning and development purposes [...] I have made many changes to the practice to accommodate with my employees. Respecting them is one of the very first things that I need to consider in practicing non-self [...] (E25C15)

However, as applied by the executives in the study, fostering mindfulness involved training and guiding employees to develop the skills needed to respond to stakeholder and project needs. By trying to introduce Buddhist practices as a way to justify the self-decentralisation approach in fostering employees' self-development, executives could become trapped in the empty speech version of practicing non-self by promoting/instrumentalising their Buddhist knowledge for organisational purposes. Such experiences were shared by participants with more than 20 years of practice:

You will start to get lost in this journey when you start explaining for yourself and educating others [...] forgetting that this journey is about educating and correcting yourself. (E26C16)

The more you understand the truths and how the world operates around you, it is very likely that you will feel more knowledgeable than others, which I experienced myself as a leader [...] sometimes it took me years to realise I'm not practicing non-self at all but just fulfilling myself by trying to impress my employees with Buddhist teachings [...] (E23C14)

Likewise, employees who practiced non-self tended to be pragmatic with regard to its application in the workplace. For instance, employees believed that impermanence could help them to deal with the pressure of their own expectations and the need to strive for achievement at work:

I no longer have expectations and it just makes me less tense. So at work, I have no expectations to be praised at all (S3C2)

Ironically, while employee participants tried to reduce expectations through practicing non-self by adjusting behaviour, they tended to avoid a sense of 'competition' or stress as a way of eliminating personal suffering. Employees also tended to believe that injustice or wrongdoing in the workplace will naturally lead to karmic consequences in due course without the need for their intervention, and this interpretation also reduced pressures or responsibility at work:

I do not mind if people do not agree with me and I do not blame colleagues for bad behaviours because everyone has their own karma. So for me, it is just important that I know that I am generating good karma. (S37C14)

Notably, employees tended not to seek understanding or acceptance of their non-self practice in the workplace:

You do not need to seek understanding from others when you practice Buddhism. That is your own practice [...] I practice non-self on my own way [...] Of course, if you have fellow Buddhist practitioners, you can share with them. But for me, their suggestions for my practice are for reference only because we all have our own contexts that we experience and understand the best. (S54C20)

In the process of self-decentralisation, a phenomenon of re-centring emerged, reflecting a form of 'empty speech' whereby executives input compassion and mindfulness in their practice of non-self, but with different forms of intent for organisational needs. Employees showed a form of personal adaptability and reluctance to consider others' opinions, which ironically contradicts the notion of dependent-arising in Buddhism.

## Discussion

This study makes a number of contributions that may help human resource theorists, researchers, and professionals to understand and make sense of the individual practice of spirituality as it affects organisational life.

### *Theoretical contributions*

The study extends the under-developed notion of self-decentralisation in the identity literature (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2019) by exploring the conceptualisation of self-decentralisation from a Buddhist perspective. Self-decentralisation is conceptualised in this study as a process of practising non-self to eliminate human suffering from excessive attachments or fulfilment of ego by letting go of *ego-centric desires* for recognition, *ego-serving expectations* that reflect levels of attachment and suffering if expectations are not met, and *illusions of having a self* that govern behaviour towards the fulfillment of selfhood.

Self-decentralisation contributes to furthering understanding of Driver's (2005) conceptualisation of spirituality in organisations as 'empty speech' and 'full speech' by showing how spiritual practices (e.g. non-self) at the individual level in the work context can represent both full and empty speech depending on individuals' sensemaking and mastery. The findings show that it is not only organisational spirituality (Driver, 2005) or dominant managerial discourses (Hoedemaekers, 2009) that maintain a fantasy of the self as complete at work (Driver, 2018); individual spiritual practices can also represent empty speech to some extent.

Participants tended to re-orient to their own needs in practising non-self in various forms of ‘empty speech’, reflecting egoistic expectations as opposed to the empty nature of non-self in self-decentralisation, which involves the *letting go of ego-centric desires* and *ego-serving expectations*. Through participants’ experiences, the ‘empty speech’ of self-decentralisation (in a form of re-centring self-decentralisation) is characterised similarly to Lacan’s (1988) imaginary self, where individuals are unable to detach from desires and expectations to fulfil the ego, leading to the imagining of a definite self, and reflecting ignorance and suffering. This reflects an imaginary self-construction where in seeking to fulfil the need for self-decentralisation, misidentification of the ego instead serves as a defence mechanism for articulating a self within ‘misidentified self-decentralisation’ practice. The notion of ‘full speech’ of non-self in self-decentralisation somewhat resembles the full speech of spirituality described in the literature (Driver, 2005; Žižek, 1989) with regard to how through struggles, individuals reject a stable and defined self through the acceptance of fragmented selves. However, self-decentralisation also rejects true subjects and subjectivity (Driver, 2005) as all subjects are empty in Buddhist emptiness theory, and thus need to be re-negotiated and even rejected subject to the impermanent nature of contexts. Full speech in this study reflects the ‘empty’ nature of the practice of non-self and self-decentralisation, highlighting the need to ‘let go’ of attachment to spiritual practices where the ego is misidentified within the practice, thus leading to misinterpretation. In other words, the findings reveal the inevitable failures of the imaginary as a liberating and empowering dynamic (Driver, 2018) by showing that the self is malleable (Rousseau, 2003) and mental representations of the self as a desirable object are incompatible with the impermanent nature of reality (Sahdra et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the study extends the literature on spirituality and sensemaking at the individual level (e.g. Ganzin et al., 2020; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; McKee et al., 2008) by moving beyond the mere focus on deliberative forms of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) with a more episodic treatment of sensemaking (e.g. Colville et al., 2016) through lived experiences of spiritual practices in organisational contexts. Most previous studies focus on sensemaking of workplace spirituality as control and instrumental mechanisms (e.g. Case & Gosling, 2010; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014), or deliberate forms of individual sensemaking and expressions of spirituality in response to workplace expectations, cultural norms or the fear of social marginalisation (e.g. Lewis & Geroy, 2000; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002).

The findings of this study contribute to understanding the temporality of sensemaking in the process of self-decentralisation as a spiritual journey that reflects the experiential and transformative nature of

spirituality (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002; Vu & Burton, 2020) – a meaning-making process of learning about life, self and faith through lived experiences in temporal ways of knowing and individuals ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962). Buddhist practice involves personal struggles and lessons learned (Vu, 2021), and participants’ sense-making of self-decentralisation in this study reflected temporal and episodic aspects (Colville et al., 2016) of sensemaking based on their mastery and experiences in practicing non-self. Some respondents with more years spent mastering self-decentralisation highlighted that part of the journey involved lessons and struggles arising from being trapped by an imaginary self due to feelings of superiority to others within their spiritual practice, thus limiting their own reflexivity – an essential feature in the transformative learning experience of spiritual practices (e.g. Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; Vu & Burton, 2020). For instance, employees lacked criticality in imposing a full rejection of others’ opinions rather than skilfully considering them, resulting in a move away from fully understanding how dependent-arising is embedded in impermanence and emptiness. The executives’ reluctance was also a result of an over-reliance on external context and karmic consequences. Agentic interventions, which were part of temporal sensemaking in the transformative journey of participants, included externalising consequences based on reduced expectations (underestimating actions, efforts and responsibilities due to impermanence), selective perception and moral justifications (selectively interpreting karmic consequences to justify motives and actions), and pragmatism (the intent behind the implementation of spiritual practices including corporate purposes, personal suffering, and the individualisation of spiritual practice).

The study points to the temporal sensemaking process of ‘being lost and becoming’ in spiritual practices, thus highlighting the need to consider individual constructivism and theorise the individual in context in workplace spirituality research agendas (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014).

### ***Implications for HRM***

First, within the context of HRM, practices often link identification with the desire to promote a particular image of the self through implicit promises of superior selfhood, success, or job security (Hoedemaekers, 2009), which can also promote a form of ‘empty speech’ whereby individuals conceive an overidentification with the image of an ideal self/employee, possibly leading to suffering in the form of dysfunctional behaviours (Driver, 2006). For instance, in decentring the self, employees in this study tried to conform with the organisation (e.g. agreeing to take part in mindfulness practices), even if it caused negative emotions

(e.g. frustration), to preserve the organisational 'self' as a justification for the practice of non-self. Similarly, in justifying the promotion of employee training and skill development (e.g. mindfulness training) to respond to stakeholder and project needs, executives claimed to be practising compassion as part of non-self while presenting 'ego' in pursuing their Buddhist practice as a form of an empty speech. Therefore, in developing HRM practice, it is crucial to support narratives that acknowledge the organisational self as de-centred, fragmented, relational and dynamic (Driver, 2006) in order to promote a culture and psychological contracts that extend beyond an emphasis on particular aspects of the desired self, or HRM practice guided by organisational normative control and set demands that colonise employees' identity, to address the lack of humanity in HRM (Johnsen & Gudmand-Høyer, 2010). This includes central practices such as HRD (Hoedemaekers, 2009) that can further foster dialogue, reflection and dissent and discourage the misidentification of the self/ego. For instance, organisations can adopt a learning environment through offering training sessions that facilitate shared experience and reflexivity, and setting tasks that challenge individuals' values, beliefs, working assumptions to raise questions about taken-for-granted realities. Alternatively, self-distanced mindfulness practices (e.g. Grossmann & Kross, 2010; Kross et al., 2005) can also be introduced to facilitate reflexivity, criticality and objectivity through reflecting on social experiences from a self-distanced perspective to eliminate egocentric recounting of experiences and work through dilemmas at work.

Second, this research adds to the calls for more reflexive practices in HRM (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Mahadevan & Kilian-Yasin, 2017). Initiating and managing spirituality in organisations needs to be executed in a reflexive process, whereby spirituality is addressed, communicated and its practice constantly reviewed and negotiated against agentic and contextual interventions. In the increasingly diverse international environment (Shen et al., 2009), it is important that HRM leaders and practitioners acknowledge personal value systems such as spirituality, but not become enslaved by prejudices (Mayer & Louw, 2013), in order to respond to the complexities of spiritual practice in organisational life flexibly and context-sensitively. For instance, some unconventional interventions such as mindfulness can be introduced to transform the collective plight of egocentric organisations (Purser, 2012), but with context-sensitivity based on individual differences and the capability to extradite individuals from instrumental logic and sensemaking based on the misidentification of the self/ego.

Third, examining sensemaking in a context like Vietnam addresses concerns about how non-Western knowledge has often been left at



the margins of international management in general (Jack et al., 2013), and in particular within the trend towards decontextualisation in research on organisational behaviour and HRM in the past two decades (Cooke et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2015). Highlighting the importance of context and contextualisation for sensemaking and understanding spirituality at work, this study is relevant to international HRM in a number of ways. Understanding cultural norms can provide guidance for HRM in relation to understanding and making sense of organisational members' motives, actions and even expectations. For instance, it is important to note the lack of criticality in how participants made sense of their spiritual practice, their reluctance to welcome others' opinions on their individuated practices, and how they avoided direct confrontation and competition. These aspects reflect a lack of criticality in the Vietnamese culture based on the cultural norms of non-questioning and face-saving (Dickhardt & Lauser, 2016). In addition, spiritual practice can influence the social settings of HRM. For instance, spiritual practices and beliefs tend to be more influential in contexts like Vietnam where formal institutions have failed to support social trust (Vu & Tran, 2021). People tend to rely on spiritual principles to justify their actions – even non-ethical decision-making. Corrupt behaviours are seen as justifiable given the systemic nature of corruption (Marquette et al., 2014), as long as they can attain positive outcomes.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to knowledge on how individuals make sense of work in the context of a spiritual practice as well as the interplay of paradoxes within spiritual practices in the work context (e.g. self-decentralisation versus re-centring self-decentralisation), which reflect the intertwining of both the full and empty 'speech' of spirituality in organisations. With regard to its limitations, this study is highly contextualised as sensemaking is only explored in relation to interpretations of Buddhist worldviews. Future studies could benefit from exploring how sense-making is shaped in different spiritual or philosophical traditions, how different traditions can contribute to understanding of the temporality of sensemaking and the interplay between prospective and retrospective aspects of sensemaking in spiritual practices, and how such processes of sensemaking influence HRM. Extending the findings of this study, future research could adopt narrative analysis and phenomenological approaches to investigate the lived experiences of individuals and the way in which they understand their experiences to further

reveal the multidimensional and paradoxical features and sensemaking process in spiritual practices. Future research could also explore reflexive managerial practices in organisations to address the lack of critical reflexivity in spiritual practice, and an overemphasis on excelling and progressing that can create room for individuals to selectively, and context-insensitively interpret and justify their instrumentalisation of spiritual practices in organisational contexts.

## Note

1. Refers to a 'discourse that does not create images of a unified, integrated and stable self but instead allows the fragmented, dislocated, and fleeting discourse of true subjectivity in the symbolic order to emerge' (Driver, 2005, p.1097), thus reflecting how the interplay between individuals and the universal order constitutes and constrains individuality (Lacan, 1977).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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