CHAPTER-III

AVADĀNAS AND JĀTAKAS:
A DETAILED STUDY
Among Buddhist narratives the plot of Avadānas and Jātakas had got much attention of scholarly world. Buddha’s popularization of his doctrines naturally made him ‘tell many tales, amusing, agreeable, both instructive and pleasant, tales by means of which, all beings not only become pleased with the law in the present life, but also after death will reach happy state’. Story telling may be considered as an imitation of preaching. The Buddhists and Europeans introduced examples in their religious discourse and drew upon fables, fairy tales and interesting anecdotes from the store house of popular tales and secular literature. Buddha conceives situations and connects the hero to a god, king, noblemen, animals, merchants, outcasts and illustrates his wisdom in connection with good deeds. He explains how he overcomes the situations in his early births; these actions persuade the ordinary people to follow good deeds.

Buddhism flourished the story literature along with religious doctrines. Early records prove that Buddha himself had established the important aspects of oral transmission of religious doctrines. In another way he utilized story telling as a

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perfect path to achieve his goal of establishing the religious ideals. From the beginning it gained large acceptance among Buddhist scholars. Thus the story literature became a major part elaborately under the titles Jātaka and Avadāna in Buddhist literature.

**Jātaka Tales - Origin and Development.**

Jātakas are commonly recognized to represent a category of Buddhist religious literature which describes the former births of the Buddha. One way they are the biographies of Buddha’s previous births. The word Jātaka literally means ‘birth’ or nativity. In Buddhist sense, it has come to mean a former birth or existence, i.e., Jātakakathā means ‘a story of one of the former births or existences of the Buddha’\(^2\). On analyzing, it is clear that most of the tales in Jātaka genre consist of the previous existence of Gautama Buddha. These stories are scattered in Piṭaka and allied works. Independent Jātakas are also found in Piṭakas. Basically it was in Pāli, later on it was translated in to Sinhalese and then it was retranslated into Pāli and then to Sanskrit and to other foreign languages. The

\(^2\)Pāli Dictionary, p.166.
specimens of Pāli Jātaka tales are in the form of parables and fables.

A number of ambiguities are in the origin of Jātaka tales. Major number of Jātakas are scattered in the Khuddakanikāya of Suttapiṭaka. The canonical versions of Pāli and Sanskrit Jātaka verses are not fully codified because of its unavailability. But in certain aspects like frame of the story it is extremely outstanding. The most notable fact is that the explanation of Jātaka tales changes occasionally because the previous existence of Buddha was absent in certain stories. As Amaresh Datta observes; ‘It is true that certain sutta of Saṃyuttanikāya has been narrated as a simple parable and not as a story of any past existence of the Buddha; hence the story cannot be called a Jātaka according to the accepted definition’.

Buddha determined to establish his message to the lowest section of the society, with the help of his followers through oral transmission. Later this method was followed by disciples and leaders. Thus the massive literary material spread under the name of the Jātaka. The Jātaka tales now available are not fully retrieved from Buddha or his disciples. As it

grows myths, legends, popular fairy tales, and other religious stories entered into this and molded the genre.

To fix the date of Buddhist canons is not easy. The date of Jātaka may be recognized to a later date than the other books of Nikāyas. They are considered to be the fairy tales of ancient society. Jātakāṭṭavaṇṇana is considered to be the early commentary of Jātaka tales scattered in Piṭakas. This is the early phase of Jātaka tales. The parables found in Saṃyuttanikāya, Dīghanikāya and Majhimanikāya were later on treated as Jātakas. They are very simple and do not possess any past existence of the Buddha.

The development of Jātaka tales also may be traced from Cariyapiṭaka⁴. It consists of thirty five Jātakas in metrical form. These stories are very brief and its primary aim is to show perfections or paramitas, which are achieved by Buddha in his early births. These stories are called cariyas. Among these a number of stories are found in Jātaka and they are elaborated. The argument of Amaresh Datta is acceptable that the Jātaka tales are developed gradually. The part of Khuddakanikāya named Jātaka consisted of the stories related

⁴A Pāli canonical work; fifteenth book of Khuddakanikāya of the Suttapiṭaka.
to the previous births of Buddha. Canonical Jātaka is consisted of 6653 verses in 547 Jātakas and are grouped under 22 nipātas; on the basis of number of verses in each Jātaka. These tales may be of late origin than other Nikāyas. The development of these literary forms continued till seventh and eighth century A.D. Rhys Davids⁵ had a different argument that the canonical Jātaka may have been composed in Northern India before the time of Aśoka.

Reconstruction of these stories happened many times. This reconstruction happened on the basis of oral transmission. The Jātakāṭṭakathā exposes the final stage of development of Jātaka tales. This is considered to be the known commentary of Jātakas. Primarily it was formed in Sinhalese and later on translated into Pāli by Famous scholar Buddhaghoṣa in fifth century A.D. This commentary has made use of very old material that must have been then handed down in oral tradition and crystallized by the third century B.C., had taken to Ceylon by Mahinda and translated it in to Singhalese during the early period of Missionary activities. Jātakāṭṭakathā was subsequently retranslated into Pāli and was designated as

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Thus it is clear that the developed form of Jātaka may have been dated fifth and sixth century A.D.

**Number of Jātaka Tales.**

The number of Jātaka stories varies in different versions. Scholars are of different opinions. Buddhist canonical text *Cullanideśa* is consisted of 500 stories. Fa-hein, the Chinese traveler remarked that some caves in Srilanka engraved with figures of 500 Jātakas. Buddhists of Myanmar and Indo-China refer to some 550 Jātakas. The maximum number of Jātakas available is 547. According to Acharya Paubol’s version Jātaka stories are 547 in number. Canonical Jātakas were not in a unique structure. The early evidences prove that the Jātakas were originally in the forms of verses, the available prose passages were its commentaries. A. K. Warder was of the opinion that the form of mixed prose and verse are very ancient and it can be found even in Veda and in the *Tripitaka* especially in the Jātaka. The most notable fact is that the prose

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6When Fa-hein visited Ceylon in the fifth century A.D., he saw the tooth remains being carried from Anurādhapura to Mahintale, both sides of the road being decorated with pictures engraving the five hundred different births of the Buddha. They were painted in different colours and executed with such care as to make them appear living.
and the verse perform the same functions in the narratives. There are about 2440 verses in the existing Jātakas. The tenth book of Khuddakanikāya is consisted of 547 Jātakas in 6653 verses. On the basis of above discussions the present study focuses on 547 Jātaka stories.

The Jātakas are classified into 22 nipātas. This division is based on the number of verses in each Jātaka, like Ekanipāta, Dukanipāta, Daśakanipāta etc. But in certain Jātakas the numbers of verses vary. (The tenth nipāta is called Daśakanipāta; like the series it must contain 10 verses only, but it consist more than ten) Thus the continuation is absent with the interpolation and adding of new verses. The Jātaka books grew up gradually, that they were not books in the modern sense, and that they had no single author. So it may be assumed that these tales were established through oral tradition, and have undergone timely changes and regional variations.

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Specific Features of Jātaka Tales.

Jātaka collections are encyclopedic in nature. They are a fruitful source of information regarding the political, religious and social conditions of ancient Indian society. The ethical and doctrinal content of the Jātakas are remarkable. They are not only the collection of religious doctrines but also a treasure house of wide-range literary productions. These are the collection of most popular folklore tales like fables, fairy tales, riddles, puzzles, legends, cleaver and witty judgments, magical stories and superstitions. The centre character of all these is Buddha himself or any previous birth of Bodhisattva. Majority of tales are attributed to the Buddhist perfections. The Jātakas scattered in various parts are the variants of original Pāli and also there are new tales, they are unknown to early canonical literature.

Jātaka tales follow the thought of transmigration of souls. This instructs that the one living being departs this life only to reborn in a new form. Through this, Buddha substantiated that the entire nature is combined in a solitary binding. These tales also provide the path of liberation from sufferings. It also reveals the way to flee from the fear of transmigration. Jātaka
tales help to identify the outstanding concern towards the world of creatures by Buddhist religion.

Buddha’s previous lives as animals are clearly depicted in Jātaka tales. He was born a number of times as animals like lion, monkey, pigeon, crab, fish, crow, quail, golden goose, buffalo, elephant, winged horse, rat, peacock, parrot, woodpecker, cock, fowl, deer, bull, ox, pig, frog, snake and the like. The Jātakas reveal that these animals have an equally important role in the path of life. In the course of life these animals are made to converse, perform, experience and behave like men. This mode of narration through animals is intuitive. These narrations are covered with supernatural elements which are impossible in our surroundings. Besides animals, Buddha also passes through the birth of various strata of society like king, ascetic, prince, brahmin, teacher, rich man, gardener, householder, merchant, forester, wise man, musician, landowner, farmer, doctor, gambler, carpenter, poor man, potter, smith, robber and the like. This way Jātaka tales deal with all the experiences, problems and sufferings related to the various sections of the society.
On analyzing it is evident that Jātaka tales are intimately connected with Avadāna tales. A number of Jātaka tales are found in *Avadānakalpalatā* and *Sūtrālaṅkāra*. They gave rise to various literatures like Avadānas, *Cariyapiṭaka*, *Nidānakathā*, and also non-canonical works like the *Milindapraśna*, *Dhammapadāṭṭakathā* and so on. The diverse nature of the content of Jātakas is sufficient to acquire great status among Indian literature in particular. They promote Buddhism, as spiritual dogma and enhanced wisdom through the medium of storytelling.

**Avadāna / Apadāna Tales**

Being one of the twelve types of literary compositions traditionally found in Buddhist Sanskrit literature, the Avadānas are thoughts that have been compiled for the edification of both enlighten beings and ordinary people. The stories are simple on doctrinal matters. They depict the ways in which good deeds motivated by love and devotion. Avadānas are a variety of Buddhist narrative literature correlating past events. They are inclusive of canonical and non-canonical material. Avadānas are found not only in Pāli and Sanskrit but also in many regional languages. The Pāli
Apadāna had two sections. *Thera*Apadāna and *Their*Apadāna. *Patyekabuddhāpadāna* and *Buddhāpadāna* are subordinate to it. *Thera*Apadāna is consisted of the life story of Buddhist monks, and *Therī*Apadāna provides the life story of Buddhist nuns. According to J.S. Speyer, *Thera*Apadānas are 550 in number and *Therī*Apadānas are 40. All the stories are not available recently. Most of them had lost their original versions. Much information is not available about them.

Apadāna literally means ‘noble deeds’. According to Monier Williams the meaning of Apadāna is ‘a great or noble work’. Advice, instruction, morals, legends and life history along with interpretation are also considered to be the meaning of Apadāna. In Buddhist literature there are hundreds of stories that fall under this category. It recounts moral stories about the previous lives of various saints.

**Origin and Development of Avadānas**

The Avadāna style of literature seems to have become popular among the schools of early Buddhism prior to the rise of the Mahayana, which would locate it approximately at the

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beginning of the Christian era. The beginning of devotional attitude towards Buddha may be originated from Avadāna stories. Avadānas stress the necessity of a long process of ethical improvement in which the individual is personally responsible for his spiritual progress. They represent a literary transitional phase between Hinayana and Mahayana. According to Hajime Nakamura¹¹, ‘The Avadāna texts stand so to speak with one foot in the Hinayana literature and the other in the Mahayana literature’. This statement agrees the fact that Buddhist narratives especially Avadānas undergo timely changes on the basis of religious thoughts. Avadānas under Mahayanist literature expounds the worship of Lord Buddha. This caused for the beginning of bhakti cult in Buddhism.

Avadāna literature belongs to Sarvāstivādins and Mahāsāṅghikas. They treat Buddha as a human being accompanied by human followers and preaching to human audiences consisting of monks, nuns and common people. The concept of Bodhisattva was used properly in Avadāna to represent the devotional attitude of Buddhist disciples. There

are a number of Avadāna tales which had lost its original versions but preserved in Chinese traditions. A little account of Avadānas is published; they are not fully traced. The manuscripts of Avadānas are preserved in the library of Nepal, China, Tibet and Tokyo.

Avadāna type literature scattered in both the Vinaya and Suttapiṭakas. When the Piṭaka literature categorized in to various strata then arise the necessity of categorizing Avadāna literature. The tales found scattered in the early works and they were arranged together and prepared a specific order. The Avadānaśataka and Divyāvadāna are the result of that effort. Buddhist narratives had a step by step expansion. Later on these Avadānas become the base of many literary compositions. Poetic renderings of Avadānas are also available from later texts like Jātakamālā, Bodhisattvāpādānakalpalatā and the like. According to Nakamura¹², The process of development of Avadāna literature can be grouped into three. (1) Old-prose Avadāna Literature, (2) Avadāna Literature in Poetical form and (3) Later prose Avadāna Literature. First two categories are not

¹²ibid, p.137.
exists in Indian tradition and are preserved in Nevari\textsuperscript{13} traditions. The last one is preserved in Hybrid Sanskrit and pure Sanskrit. They also had got great acceptance among the scholars. *Avadāṇaśataka* and its remodeling are traced out from the third category. They mainly enclose *Kalpadrumāvadāna, Ratnāvadānamālā, Vicitrakarṇikāvadāna, Aśokāvadānamālā, Vratāvadānamālā, Divyāvadāna* and *Divyāvadānamālā*.

Avadāna literature got popularity along with the bhakti cult. They are popular as the stories related to karma doctrine. But the doctrine of karma is dealt with a devotional flavour. This literature focused the practical aspects of the religion. But these tales do not provide the idea of achieving salvation through the worship of Buddha. They highlight the thought that a trouble-free integrity towards the Buddha and any of Buddhist adoration could make sheltered in a heavenly birth.

**Distinctiveness of Avadāna tales.**

The outcome of good deeds or bad deeds heading towards Buddha, Dharma and saṅgha and also the description of

\textsuperscript{13}Nevari: one of the major languages of Nepal, and also used in Sikkim. It was Nepal’s administrative language from 14\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} c. It is associated with Sanskrit.
religious implications are depicted in these texts. They are heterogeneous in nature. The past lives of a particular Buddha, the practice of pāramitas and the like are the highlighting factors of Avadāna tales. The MahāvastuApadāna focuses the past events in the life of a particular Buddha. Avadānaśataka mainly depicts the past actions of Bodhisattva and his practice of pāramitas to become a Buddha.

Avadānas are mainly consisted of the predictions of Buddhas and the future Buddhahood. The stories related to arhants and arhantship are also a part of Avadānas. J.S.Speyer\textsuperscript{14} in the preface of the edition of Avadānaśataka pointed out that the language and style of Avadānas may broadly divided into three. 1. Early Canonical type, 2. Posterior Canonical type and 3. Post Canonical type. The first type is directly related with Vinaya and Sutra texts. Second type may be considered as pure Avadānas. It is a part of Suttapiṭaka. Third type is consisted either as a single or a group of Avadānas composed in pure Sanskrit. Jātakamālā of Āryaśūra belongs to this category.

\textsuperscript{14}Speyer.J.S. op.cit. intro: xiv.
A Concise Review of Avadānas

The Avadānaśataka: The oldest among them in Sanskrit is probably the Avadānaśataka. The stories enclosed this are related to Hinayana, there is no trace of any mythological references of Mahayana\textsuperscript{15}. It is consisted of hundred Avadānas and is grouped into ten vargas. There are also heroic deeds, stories of human beings, miracles, prophecies and pious acts. The Kalpadrumāvadānamālā and Aśokāvadānamālā are also included in the same category. Ratnamālāvadāna is consisted of 38 stories. Vicitrakarṇikāvadāna is in Nevāri script.

The Divyāvadāna (The Heavenly Avadānas): It is a later collection of legends but fragments of old texts are also included in it. The text begins with a Mahayana benediction ‘अन्तः नमः श्रीसर्ववृद्धिविसत्वेऽभ्यः’ it means that the Sarvāstivādins adopted a Mahayana belief. There is an opinion that the Divyāvadāna is a work of Mūlasarvāstivādins\textsuperscript{16}. It is consisted of 38 stories. There are many stereotyped passages describing the attributes of the Buddha. According to Winternitz\textsuperscript{17}; “There is no sign of any principle of arrangement. The

\textsuperscript{16}Nakamura. \textit{op.cit.} p.138.
\textsuperscript{17}Winternitz. \textit{op.cit.} vol. II p.285.
language and style too are by no means unified. Most of the legends are written in simple Sanskrit prose, only interrupted here and there by Gāthās.” A number of canonical works are quoted in those texts.

Āśokāvadāna is consisted of four stories depicted in Divyāvadāna. Biographical events related with King Aśoka and his family members are narrated here. Pāmśupradānāvadāna, Vītaśokāvadāna, Kuṇālāvadāna are also associated with it. It is a mixed work of both prose and poetry.

The Vratāvadānamālā, (The Garland of Avadānas on Festivals or Rites) is a collection of legends which were composed to explain the origin of some feasts or rites. This is in the frame work of the dialogue between Upagupta and Aśoka.

The Bhadrakalpāvadāna (Avadānas from the good age of the world) is a collection of 34 legends related to Upagupta and Aśoka.

The Sumagadhāvadāna is a legend of Sumagadha, the daughter of the rich merchant Ananthapiṇḍika. Some passages
are parallel to the *Divyāvadāna* and are related to the Sarvāstivādins.

A Sanskrit fragment of *Vimānāvadāna* corresponds to some verses of *Vimānavatthu*. The *Kavikumarāvadāna* is consisted of the legends of Kavikumara. The *Suvarṇavarṇāvadāna* is a collection of Avadānas told by Ānanda to the boy Suvarṇavarṇa. The *Maṇicūḍāvadāna* is the story of a virtuous king Maṇicūḍa. This particular story praises the Dānapāramita of Bodhisatva. *Ajātaśatrāvadāna* narrates the devotion of Ajātaśatru, the king of Magadha towards Buddha.

There are another category of Avadānas like *Piṇḍapātrāvadāna*, *Kaṭhināvadāna*, and *Dvāvinśatyavadāna*. The first among them is an account of praise of giving bowls of alms to the monks. The king of Dīpavatī, named Sarvānanda presented alms to Dipankara Buddha. The virtue of alms is the highlighting factor of this Avadāna. *Kaṭhināvadāna* is an account of the virtue of donations and asceticism during the period of Kaṭhina\(^\text{18}\).

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\(^{18}\)Kaṭhina Period starts with the first day of the new moon in the month of Āśvina. This period extends to thirty days.
Dvāviṃśatayavadāna is an account of twenty two Avadāna tales and it explains the merit of devotion towards Buddha. All are not fully traced. Suvarṇābhāvadāna, Candanāvadāna, Vihārāvadāna, Pūrṇāvadāna, Divyānandāvadāna, Ratnavyūhāvadāna and the like are famous among them.

Vicitrakarṇīkāvadāna is a later Mahayana text. The tales from Avadānaśataka and Vratāvadāna are narrated here. It is consisted of more than thirty tales. The languages used are of diverse nature. Winternitz\(^\text{19}\) observed that ‘the language of this Avadāna is as varied as the contents, now in a barbaric Sanskrit; again good Sanskrit verses and sometimes even Pāli’. This text glorifies holy places, holy rites and certain religious rituals. The description of various Bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya and the like can be traced out from this text.

The Vicitrakarṇīkāvadānoddhṛta, Śārdūlakarṇīkāvadāna, Sugatāvadāna, Kapiśāvadāna, Ratnamālāvadāna, Kalpadrumāvadānamālā, Mahāvastuāvadāna and the like are other famous Avadānas. At present the critical editions and studies of a very few among them are available.

\(^{19}\)Winternitz, *op.cit.* vol. II. p.292.
Jātakas and Avadānas: A Comparison

Both Jātaka and Avadāna comprise a major part of Buddhist literature for showing moral and religious doctrines. And they together encompass the power of Karma doctrine. According to S.C. Sarkar\textsuperscript{20} the basic differences between the two are; In the Jātakas the Bodhisattva is the principal dramatic person, while in the Avadāna this is not so in many cases. The Bodhisattva is represented in a great number of the Avadānas. Every Jātaka may be called an Avadāna, but not the vice-versa. Only when the hero of the past is the Bodhisattva, this kind of Avadāna can be called Jātaka. The Avadānas too like the Jātakas, have a story of the present and a story of the past. Whereas the Jātakas always describe a previous existence of the Buddha, the Avadāna deal not only with the Buddha, but also with the saints, arhants and many other beings. The present story of the Jātakais generally shorter than that of the Avadāna stories. The Buddhist doctrine of karma has been illustrated properly in the Jātaka. But in the Avadānas the nature is different and bhakti cult predominates in those writings.

Avadānas and Jātakas are similar in many aspects. Both of them contain stories which are composed or compiled from the ancient

literature both Buddhist and Brahmanic, to build up the moral conduct of the common people. They show great and reliable power of karma which decides the destinies of all creatures in their countless existences.

**The Function of Jātakas and Avadānas**

Jātaka tales had got immense prominence all over the world and are translated in almost all popular languages. In the case of Avadānas most of them are still unpublished, a very few are published and translated into English. Avadāna type of literature did not get much acceptance among the readers. The people gave prominence to Pāli and Sanskrit Jātakas to repeat moral lessons. So J.S.Speyer in the edition of *Avadānaśataka*, states that ‘The Jātaka stories related to the glorious and heroic deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives. The common people could not be made familiar with the glorious deeds of the world famed Buddha. They could not understand what the great hero had done, they too could do. So there was a need for something humbler i.e. glorious deeds of some ordinary human beings with whom the common folk could made identity. The Avadāna literature served this purpose because in
these stories the Bodhisattva was not compulsorily a hero. Any saint could play the part of a hero in these Avadānas’. 21

Instead of the limitations these Avadānas provide a new realm among Indian narratives. The situations from common man’s day to day functions made an interesting literary form. The main intention of both Jātakas and Avadānas are to establish the religious and philosophical ideals of Buddhism. Avadānas clearly follow the bhakti cult, and also offer the heavenly birth through the devotion of Buddha. The coordination of Avadānas is happened in the popular phase of Mahayana Buddhism.

The ethical nature of religion embodied in Jātakas is same for both Hinayana and Mahayana traditions. The practice of virtues like charity, honesty, acceptance, wisdom, effort, patience, reliability, persistency, love and self-control will lead towards Buddhahood. Jātaka tales focused the establishment of these noble paths. These tales also gave prominence to altruistic virtues. For fulfilling the function of these Buddhist narratives they fabricated stories in connection with the life of Buddha and his disciples. Various stories, not only from

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21Speyer ,loc.cit.
Indian tradition but from world literature also, were converted into Jātakas to serve the purpose. These tales also reveal the thoughts, beliefs, manners and customs of ancient Indian people. Illustration of ideas and superstitions of early civilization was also seen in these narratives. Thus they opened a new realm of studies in the field of social history and anthropology. The narrative methods and techniques used in these tales also provide a new awakening in the field of postmodern narratology.

The current concern of storytelling has its origin from early Indian narratives, especially Jātakas and Avadānas. An analysis of these narratives on the light of narrative theory may help to recognize the structural rudiments in a story and its combination styles. The narrative discourses and approach of these tales using contemporary tools of language studies are useful in the studies of narratology.

Jātakas and Avadānas are the fascinating specimens of Indian Buddhist literature. They possess a unique value among other Indian Narratives. These are the base of moral sayings and instructive sensations of Indian literature in general. They have a reflective relation with folklore and are also throwing
lights on the thoughts and superstitions of early life. These tales help to determine how Buddhist communities adapted narratives to their own purposes. They signify diverse key values of religion that flourished in various countries. In Indian tradition these stories highlight the significance of dharma practice. In Tibetan tradition they focus the benefits of a master. The qualities of Buddha were the highlighting feature of Chinese tradition. Flexibility of these narratives had contributed much to the development of Buddhism. ‘Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project’ by German Oriental Society in 1970 under the guidance of Dr. W. Voigt helped to trace out a number of Manuscripts of Jātakas and Avadānas. These innovations helped to detect the variant aspects of these narratives and a more accessible way to find out the variety techniques of Buddhist literature.

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