**Chapter 3: Sikh Traditions**

**Student Study Guide**

Chapter Overview

Emerging in the western Indian state of Punjab, the Sikh religion is the youngest of the native Indian traditions. There are about 25 million Sikhs worldwide, with 5 million living outside of India.

The Sikh tradition was founded by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who was born in a village near Lahore. In his day, the Punjab region was very diverse, featuring cultural elements from the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. Religiously, too, there was great diversity: the area was shared by Sufis, Jainas, Nath yogis, North Indian sants, and Hindus. Guru Nanak had a mystical experience at the age of 30 and then went on a pilgrimage, engaging in discussions with different masters from the various religions. After this period, in 1519, he established a village named Kartarpur along the Ravi River in central Punjab. He declared that there was neither Hindu nor Muslim from a higher perspective and established a unique path, free from either major religion. Over time he composed 974 hymns, which became the foundational scripture for the Sikhs. Guru Nanak was well-versed with the other religious traditions in the region, and his verses made a clear distinction between his teachings and those that came before them. He also established Sikh rituals, practices, and principles including meditation on the One God’s name, devotional singing, reverence for the gurus and scriptures, egalitarianism, tolerance, service to others, and a righteous life in the world.

There are ten gurus in the Sikh tradition. In chronological order they are Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Harkrishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh. These ten gurus steered the Sikh tradition through many challenges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries including persecution, martyrdom, and internal diversities. Furthermore, each of the gurus made significant contributions to the tradition including composing various scriptures, regulating different disciplines, sanctioning festivals, and establishing temples—the most important being the Darbar Sahib, or Golden Temple, at Amritsar. After the tenth guru, the authority of the gurus was invested in the scriptures and the community of believers, producing a sophisticated understanding of the notion of “guru.”

Sikhs hold that there is “One Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, and known by grace through the Guru.” Their name for this god is Akal Purakh, the Eternal One. They agree with science regarding evolution however, rejecting the idea of the universe coming into existence on its own without the will of Akal Purakh. Human life is important because humans have the ability to discover their true nature. Karma is subject to divine order and can be overridden in the name of justice by Akal Purakh’s grace. Indian *karma* state that actions keep people in the cycle of life, death and rebirth and experience of enlightenment make a path towards liberation whereas Sikh *karam* believes that our actions are part of divine law or *hukam* and liberation is achieved by the grace of god or *nadar*. Sikh immigration to Canada began in the early 1900s. Due to discrimination against Sikhs, their ship was declined to land on the shores of Vancouver in 1914. However, a federal judge ruled this action to be discrimination and because of that decision, today there are over half a million Sikhs living in Canada.

Humans tend to be driven by the five evils (lust, anger, covetousness, attachment, and pride) and can be liberated in one lifetime by discipline and by remembering the divine Name. Sikhs also focus on ethics, with an emphasis on justice. These ethical principles include cultivating virtues like contentment, humility, truthfulness, justice, temperance, love, forgiveness, charity, purity, fear of Akal Purakh, and wisdom. Both congregational and individual worship is taught in Sikhism. The Khalsa (“pure”) order was created in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh to provide a common identity based on attire, loyalty, and discipline. There is an initiation ceremony during which the initiate is “reborn” in the house of the Guru. On a personal level, the Khalsa initiation is extremely important, but not all Sikhs participate.

Sikh women organize meetings for prayers at gurdwaras or at each other’s houses. They call these gatherings Istari Satsang and every region has its own Istari Satsang. They offer prayers and participate in devotional activities, get involved in projects for children’s education, and form groups to help build new gurdwaras and do community work.

The encounter with the modern world, first under British rule in India and then through the advent of globalization, has produced both reform and conservative movements in Sikhism. The Sikhs are challenged with the changing situation in India, both politically and economically, as well as by the millions of Sikhs who live around the world and are facing situations that are vastly different than those of the culture in which their tradition arose. However, with the dynamics of this tradition and a strong history of adaptation, the Sikh tradition is thriving in the twenty-first century. Today, Sikhs can be seen in prominent positions in Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has four Sikh-Canadians in his Cabinet. Sikhs living abroad believe in the Sikh worldview of living a life of love and how everything is connected to the True One who is present in everything. They are trying to educate people about their religion and through that eradicate institutional racism. This education is not only helping them but other minorities as well. They are engaging in interfaith dialogues to not only educate others about their religion but to grow spiritually themselves and to keep their identity in this melting pot/mosaic environment.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* explore the historical context in which the Sikh tradition originated, the founder (Guru Nanak), the lineage of ten Gurus, and formation of the Khalsa;
* learn about the compatibility of Sikh religion and science
* explore the difference between Hindu *karma* and Sikh *karam*
* learn about the Akal Purakh’s utterance that represents all knowledge and eternal vibration that fills the entire space;
* learn about Sikh sacred texts, doctrine, notions of Guruship, and ethics;
* discover the daily and annual cycles of ritual practice;
* examine the Sikh encounter with modernity and various reform movements;
* appreciate Sikh cultural expressions such as music, art, and literature;
* trace the Sikh interactions and adaptations through the twentieth century, in India and globally;
* learn about the challenges Sikhs faced to keep their place in foreign lands
* explore recent developments in Sikh responses to pluralism and technological changes.
* discover the place of Sikhs in today’s political sphere in North America
* role of women in the betterment of Sikh communities all over the world through Istari Satsang gatherings
* Sikh worldview from a Sikh activist and educator

Key Terms

**Adi Granth** The “original book” first compiled by Guru Arjan and invested with supreme authority. (p. 127)

**Akal Purakh** “The One Beyond Time”; God. (p. 129)

*amrit* “Divine Nectar”; the Khalsa initiation nectar. (p. 125)

Baisakhi An Indian new year’s holiday in mid-April, when Sikhs celebrate the birthday of the Khalsa. (pp. 137-138)

Bana The Khalsa dress. (p. 126)

*bani* “Divine Utterance”; the works of the Gurus and the Bhagats recorded in the Adi Granth. (p. 126)

Bhagat“Devotee”; one of the poets of traditions other than Sikhism whose work is included in the Adi Granth (e.g., Kabir, Ravidas, Namdev). (p. 127)

chauriA ceremonial whisk (made of yak hair or man-made fiber attached to a wooden handle) that is waved over Guru Granth Sahib as a mark of respect. (p. 137)

**Dasam Granth** The second sacred collection of texts. (p. 127)

***Dhur ki Bani:*** “Divine Utterances from the Beginning” is the expression to refer to the Sikh notion of revelation. (p. 130)

**Five Ks** The five marks of Khalsa identity: uncut hair (*kes*), wooden comb (*kangha*), sword (*kirpan*), wrist ring (*kara*), and short breeches (*kachh*). (p. 126)

**gurdwara** The “guru’s door”; the Sikh place of worship. (p. 155)

**Guru** “Teacher”; either a spiritual person or the divine inner voice. (p. 131)

*granthi* “Reader”; the reader and custodian of the Guru Granth Sahib who performs traditional rituals in the gurdwara. (p. 136)

*gur-bilas* “Splendor of the Guru”; Sikh literature of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries praising the martial traits of two warrior Gurus, Hargobind and Gobind Singh (pp. 127-128)

*Gurmukh* One who faces the Guru, a follower of the Divine and of the Guru. (p. 120)

Gurmukhi Literally, “from the Guru’s mouth”; the vernacular script in which the compositions of the **Gurus** were first written down. It has since become the script of Punjabi language. (p. 122)

***Gurpurb*** “Celebration of anniversaries related to the Gurus.” (p. 138)

*gursikhs* Literally, “Disciples of the Guru.” (p. 123)

*hukam* “Divine order, will, or command”; an all-embracing principle, the sum total of all divinely instituted laws; a revelation of the nature of God. (p. 129)

*haumai “*I-ness, my-ness”; self-centered pride. (p. 130)

**Istari Satsang** “Spiritual Fellowship of Women” meaning gatherings of women in their respective regions to take part in devotional activities. (p. 144)

*janam-sakhis* “Birth testimonies”; traditional accounts of the life of Guru Nanak. (p. 118)

**Khalsa** The “pure” or “crown estate”; an order of Sikhs bound by a common identity and discipline. (p. 125 )

***kirtan***The singing of hymns from the scriptures in worship. (p. 136)

**Khalsa Diwan society** an organization established in 1907 in Vancouver by the first Sikhs ever to immigrate to Canada (p. 148)

*karah prashad* A sweet pudding or paste of flour, sugar, and butter that is prepared in an iron bowl with prayers, placed in the presence of the Sikh scripture during worship, and then distributed in the congregation. (p. 137)

karam “Actions” or karma; the destiny or fate of an individual, generated in accordance with deeds performed in one’s present and past existences. (p. 130)

*Kes-dhari* Literally, “hair-bearer”; a Sikh who affirms his identity by wearing unshorn hair (p. 143)

**Mul Mantar** The “Basic Formula”; the opening creedal statement of the Adi Granth declaring the eternity and transcendence of God. (p. 129)

langar The term for both the community kitchen and the meal that is prepared there and served to all present in the congregation. (p. 121)

*miri-piri* The doctrine that the Guru possesses both temporal (*miri*) and spiritual (*piri*) authority. (p. 156)

***nam*** “The divine Name.” (p. 116)

***nam-simaran*** The “Remembrance of the divine Name,” especially the devotional practice of meditating on the divine Name. (p. 131)

**Panth** The “path,” and hence the Sikh community. (p. 156)

*panj kakke* See Five Ks. (p. 126)

*Panj Piare*The “Cherished Five”; the first five Sikhs to be initiated as members of the Khalsa in 1699; five Sikhs in good standing chosen to represent a *sangat*. (p. 125)

*pothi* Volume or book. (p. 122)

***rahit*** The code of conduct for the Khalsa. (p. 125)

*raga* A series of five or six notes on which a melody is based. (p. 145)

*sahaj* The condition of ultimate bliss resulting from the practice of nam-simaran. (p. 156)

*sangat*Congregation; group of devotees in Sikhism. (p. 121)

*sansar* “Cycle of birth and death”; Transmigration in Sikh terminology. (p. 130)

Sants Ascetic poets who believed divinity to exist beyond all forms or description. (p. 156)

*sati*The immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre. (p. 123)

*Sehaj-dhari* Literally, a “gradualist”; a Sikh who follows the teachings of the Gurus but has not accepted the Khalsa discipline. (p. 141)

*shabad* Literally, “divine Word,” a hymn of the Adi Granth. (p. 130)

**Sikhi** “Sikh-ness,” referring to living Sikh practice. (p. 156)

Singh Sabha Literally, “Society of Singhs”; a revival movement established in 1873 that redefined the norms of Sikh doctrine and practice. (p. 142)

Vak “Saying”; a passage from the Guru Granth Sahib that is chosen at random and read aloud to the congregation as the lesson of the day. (p. 137)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

**1.** Which religions contributed to the dynamic situation in Punjab in the fifteenth century?

**2.** What mystical experience did Guru Nanak have and how did he understand his mission after this?

**3.** Who was the fifth Guru and what did he accomplish?

**4.** What is the Khalsa?

**5.** What is the fundamental statement of Sikh belief?

**6.** In Sikhism, what is the value of human life?

**7.** What are the four notions of “Guru” in the Sikh tradition?

**8.** What is the Sikh sense of justice?

**9.** What are the five aspects of the morning liturgy for a Sikh?

**10.** What were the reasons for the Nirankari and Singh Sabha reform movements?

**11.** What did the wife of the second guru contribute to the Panth?

**12.** How has Sikh devotional literature continued to be relevant in modern Sikh writing today?

**13.** What was “Operation Blue Star?”

**14.** Why is religious pluralism not necessarily perceived as a threat to the Sikh tradition?

**15.** What efforts has Balbir Singh Seechewal made in bringing awareness to environmental issues and how does he relate this to the Sikh tradition?

**16.** Is Hinduism’s *karma* and Sikh idea of *karam* the same?

**17.** Are science and Sikh ideas of creation compatible?

**18.** What is *dhur ki bani*? Which guru coined this term?

**19.** What does the word *simaran* mean? And what does it symbolize?

**20.** When did the Sikh population start immigrating to Canada? What are some of the organizations they formed there?

**21.** When did the Sikh population start immigrating to United States? What are some of the organizations they formed there?

**22**. What is the function of Istari Satsang?

Study Questions: Answer Key

**1.** With the blending of cultural elements from the Middle East, Central Asia, and India, many religious traditions existed in Punjab at that time. These included Sufism, Jainism, Nath yogis, and Sants, as well as Hindus devoted to Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. (p. 116)

**2.** While bathing in the Vein River one morning, Guru Nanak disappeared for three days before reemerging from the water proclaiming, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” This is understood to mean that at the higher levels these distinctions do not exist. For Guru Nanak, his experience was the beginning of a divine mission wherein God had given him the job of spreading the teachings of the holy Name. (p. 118)

**3.** Guru Arjan (1563–1606) was the fifth Guru. Arjan built the Golden Temple, organized the scriptures, helped develop a cohesive Sikh identity, and became the first martyr in the Sikh community. This last event pushed the Sikh community towards self-consciousness, separatism, and militancy. (pp. 123-124)

**4.** Because Sikhs present at the martyrdom of Guru Tegh concealed themselves out of fear, Baha-dur, the tenth Guru, imposed outward signs on his followers to make Sikhs recognizable. Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa, an order of loyal Sikhs bound by a common identity and discipline. These individuals must undergo an initiation, and are given new names, new birthplaces, and new homes. The five signs for recognizing a Sikh are unshorn hair, a wooden comb, a miniature sword, a wrist-ring, and short breeches. (pp. 125-126)

**5.** “There is One Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru. The Eternal One, from the beginning, through all time, present now, the Everlasting Reality.” (p. 129)

**6.** One is blessed with the rarest opportunity of the human birth through the grace of the Guru. One’s mind and body are dyed deep red (with the love of the divine Name) if one is able to win the approval of the True Guru. Thus, human life is important for realizing our true spiritual nature. (p. 130)

**7.** God as guru or the inner guru is the first notion. The second notion is the teacher as guru, who is a channel for the voice of Akal Purakh. The scripture as guru is the third notion, and, finally, the community as guru is the fourth notion. (pp. 131-133)

**8.** The Sikhs see justice as the primary duty of rulers and administrators. They regard violations of human rights as a serious moral offence. For them, justice consists of respect for the rights of others and a lack of exploitative behavior. Only when all methods and means have been tried to bring about justice and have failed is the use of force allowed. (p. 134)

**9.** The early morning order is (1) *Japji* (“Honoured Recitation”), (2) *Jap Sahib* (“Master Recitation”), (3) the Ten *Savayyas* (“Ten Panegyrics”), (4) *Benati Chaupai* (“Verses of Petition”), and (5) *Anand Sahib* (“Song of Bliss”). (p. 135)

**10.** The Nirankari movement was founded by Baba Dayal Das (1783–1853) and was devoted to purging Hindu influences from Sikhism. It emphasized the One Formless God, recognized personal gurus descending from the founder, and accepted orthodox doctrine. The Singh Sabha movement was established in 1873. It sought to reestablish Sikh identity under casual threat from reversion to Hindu practices, actively proselytizing Christian missionaries, and Hindu Arya Samaj followers. It focused on education and strengthening the Khalsa position and contributed to two legal changes in Indian law: the legal recognition of the distinctive Sikh wedding ritual in the Anand Marriage Act of 1909, and the re-establishment of direct Khalsa control of the major gurdwaras through the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak committee, to which control of all the gurdwaras was passed. (pp. 141-142)

**11.** Mata Khivi was the wife of the second guru. She developed the *langar* tradition where people of every caste can gather after a celebration and eat together. (p. 144)

**12.** Sikh devotional literature is written in Gurmukhi script. These devotional hymns were written by various gurus and are recorded in the Adi Granth. These early writings continue to be a source of inspiration for some contemporary writers who integrate passionate exegetical texts, such as Harinder Singh Mehboob’s work. (p. 146)

**13.** “Operation Blue Star” was a military assault launched by the Indian government against a group of Sikh radicals. The group of Sikhs were armed and occupying the Akal Takhat building of the Golden Temple. Many Sikhs were killed during the assault, including the leader. This contributed to further hostilities between Sikhs and the Indian government on both political and religious grounds. (p. 147)

**14.** The Sikh tradition emerged in a religiously pluralist environment, with Jainas, Hindus, Muslims, and Sufis active in the same area. Rather than advocating a path of renunciation, the Sikh tradition formed dialogues with the various religions. They were willing to learn from other traditions but also promote their own individual identity as a separate religious community. The writings found in the Adi Granth suggest a four-part theory of religious pluralism. (p. 150)

**15.** Balbir Singh Seechewal is an environmentalist who uses Sikh narratives to engage people in environmental issues. For example, it is believed that the Sikh founder, Guru Nanak had a mystical experience while bathing in a river. Balbir Singh Seechewal uses this story to appeal to people’s interest in restoring the river to a cleaner state. (p. 152)

**16.** No. Sikh *karam*’s source is the Arabic word that means grace. Although *karam* in Sikh religion also means actions it is different from Hinduism’s *karma* which means it is unescapable and objective. In Sikh religion it is escapable and can be eradicated from one’s life with good deeds. The Hindu *karma* means actions good or bad keep us in a cycle of life, death and rebirth until we experience enlightenment and achieve liberation or *moksha*. The Sikh version of *karam* means that the cycle of life, death and rebirth, because of our actions, is part of the divine law or *hukam* and with the grace of god or *nadar,* liberation is achieved. (p. 130)

**17.** Sikh tradition and scientific theories are generally compatible. They do not have any problem with the theory of evolution. For Sikhs, science supports their take on the creation of the universe as they consider the universe to be expanding as well but for them the addition is that it is the mind of Akal Purakh that is the source. There are some disagreements as well, for example, they are against the idea that the universe exists without a creator. (pp. 129-130)

**18.** *Dhur ki bani* means “the Divine Utterance from the Beginning”. It means that whatever the Guru utters symbolizes all knowledge and the everlasting sounding vibration that fills up all the space. In other words it emphasizes the concept of revelation. Guru Arjan coined this term. (pp. 130-131)

**19.** *Simaran* means a kind of recollection that eradicates egocentricity. It is derived from the Sanskrit word *marana* which means to die or pass away. It symbolizes the death of a person’s selfishness, his realization that a higher power exists. It is the representation of the existence of everlasting vibrations of the divine Name. It could become a part of your everyday life, either spiritual or political. (p. 131)

**20.** Sikhs started coming to Canada a few years after a Sikh regiment was passing through British Columbia after taking part in a parade honoring Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. The first ever Sikhs opened an organization, Khalsa Diwan Society, in 1907. There were some major setbacks as well. In 1914 the Japanese steamship Komagata brought 376 Indians, 351 of whom were Sikhs and was denied access to the Vancouver port because of the negative sentiments about Sikhs in the region. Due to a change in immigration act in 1951, in 1960s many Sikhs landed on the shores of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Large number of Sikhs immigrated to Canada in 1984 after the attack on Golden Temple Complex. Decades later, the current population of Sikhs is more than half a million in Canada. (p. 148)

**21.** In 1899, four Sikhs arrived on the ship Nippon Maru in the United States. Sikhs who faced challenges in Canada moved to California. They started their small setup of a gurdawara in Stockton in 1912. The West coast of America had a considerable population of 5,000 Sikhs in the region. The Immigration Act of 1965 made the immigration system a little better and many skilled workers, especially Sikhs, started coming to the U.S. In the 1980s, a large Sikh population settled in the U.S, which resulted in over half a million Sikhs currently living in the U.S. (pp. 148-149)

**22.** Istari Satsangs are the local or regional organizations created by Sikh women for devotional activities. These organizations have given women power to influence the religious circle in a subtle way. These gatherings have resulted in a decision of making a gurdwara in Ludhiana and have put Sikh religion out in the world by making videos about prayers and celebrations and uploading them on YouTube. Sikh women all around the world have been very active in these organizations and create avenues through it to better the society and educate the world about their religion. (p. 144)

Reflection Questions

1. What elements of the Nath tradition may be reflected in Guru Nanak’s experiences and teachings?

2. How does the Sikh understanding of divine grace fit within a worldview that advocates *karam* and *sansar?*

3. The Guru Panth suggests that the divine is found within the assembly of Sikh practitioners and that the community is the path of the Guru. How does one conceive of an imminent divine presence within the community?

4. Traditionally, Sikh children are named through a ritual that integrates the writings of the Adi Granth. Assuming you are not of the Sikh tradition, can you envision naming your child by leaving the first letter of his/her first name “up to chance?” Would a Sikh practitioner see it this way?

5. Purity of the tradition is an element found within Nirankaris reform movement thinking. What are the pros and cons of such a position?

6. How does Sikh religion take ideas of creation? Religions that accept scientific facts as the truth tend to add their own version of events as well. Does Sikh religion do that?

7. Sikh religion is generally compatible with science and its theories. What are some of the things mentioned in the chapter that this religious tradition disagrees with?

8. How has Istari Satsang empowered Sikh women? What are some of their achievements that were made possible by using the platform of Istari Satsang?

Research Paper Topics

**1.** What is Max Weber’s concept of an “ethical prophet” and how does Guru Nanak’s founding of the Sikh tradition reflect Weber’s theory?

**2.** How is Guru Gobind Singh’s transfer of spiritual authority significant to the further development of the Sikh tradition?

**3.** The notions of *karam* (karma) and *sansar* (samsara) are common to all traditions that emerged from ancient India. How do the Sikh understandings of these concepts differ from those of Hindus, Jainas, or Buddhists? In what way are they the same?

**4.** The Sikh tradition holds four notions of the Guru. How are these various understandings of the Guru reflected in the belief and practice of the tradition?

**5.** Why are the hours between 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. known as the “ambrosial hours” and why is this considered to be the best time for an hour of devotional prayers? What are the five morning prayers and how is their content reflective of the early morning?

**6.** Research all the life-cycle rituals that are performed during the life of a Sikh practitioner. How are these rituals tied specifically to the Guru Granth Sahib? What is the significance of experiencing each life-cycle ritual?

**7.** Who are the Sehaj-dharis? How do they differ from Khalsa Sikhs and what relationships did they form with both the Khalsa Sikhs and Hindu Indians? How have their relationships changed over time? How have the relationships changed in the Sikh diaspora?

**8.** Explain the connection between the Akali movement and the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Pra-bandhak Committee). How have the SGPC faired throughout the twentieth century? As the world becomes increasingly globalized, how will diaspora communities and the Internet impact the SGPC?

**9.** Research three North American gurdwaras through their Internet websites and scholarly case studies. What changes have these communities made in order to adapt to the North American context? What are the continuities between the North American diaspora communities and those in India?

**10.** In recent decades, many organizations have formed in response to Sikh visibility and subsequent discrimination and hate crimes. Research the Canadian Sikh Coalition and Sikhs for Justice. How are these groups assisting Sikhs? How are they affecting dialogue between Sikhs and non-Sikhs? How is this similar and different from pluralist India in which the Sikh tradition emerged?

**11**. Sikh religion promotes the idea of a Supreme Being whose nature a man cannot understand, Christians have a God who is present in three yet one and this trinity is a mystery, and Muslims believe in a God who is powerful and all-knowing but human beings have not achieved that level of understanding where they could understand him. All these religions talk about one god but with a mystery surrounding him. If they all have these common ideas, how is Sikh religion different than them?

**12.** What are some of the challenges that Sikhs have faced in the West to keep their identity intact?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

*Sikhism: The Guru’s Wisdom*. 2012. 20 minutes. Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

*World Sikhism Today*. 49 minutes. Films for Humanities and Sciences.

Cape, Tights and a Turban: A Sikh Superhero. One man’s quest to rescue America from Stereotypes

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