
CHARAKA AND CHARAKA SAMHITA: A FOUNDATIONAL TEXT FOR EARLY SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION AND EVIDENCE-BASED REASONING

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ABSTRACT

The Charaka Samhita, one of the foundational triads of classical Ayurveda, stands as a monumental treatise on ancient Indian medicine, attributed to the sage-physician Charaka (circa 300 BCE-200 CE). The Charaka Samhita is often celebrated as a cornerstone of ancient medicine, but its primary significance lies in its rigorous epistemological and methodological framework, which established an early template for scientific investigation. This paper examines how the text transitioned Indian medicine from a magico-religious tradition to an evidence-based clinical science. By bridging ancient medical wisdom with contemporary paradigms of personalized and evidence-based medicine, this research underscores the Charaka Samhita's role as a precursor to modern scientific temperament and its enduring relevance in the history of global healthcare. Special attention is given to Charaka's emphasis on ethical practice, the physician-patient relationship, medical education, and the integration of mind-body-spirit in healing. In modern times, it serves as a primary reference for evidence-based validation of traditional practices, integration with biomedicine, standardization of herbal drugs, and development of integrative healthcare models.

KEYWORDS: Charaka, Charaka Samhita, Medicine, Vata, Pitta, Kapha.

INTRODUCTION

The Charaka Samhita stands as one of the most authoritative and comprehensive foundational texts of the Indian system of medicine, revered as the cornerstone of Ayurveda (science of life). Attributed to Acharya Charaka (with later redactions by Dridhabala), this ancient treatise-structured into eight sections (*Sthanas*) encompassing over 120 chapters-

systematizes the principles, diagnostics, and therapeutics of holistic healthcare. It emphasizes prevention alongside cure, viewing health as a dynamic equilibrium of the *Tridosha* (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha), *Dhatus* (tissues), *Malas* (wastes), and the interplay of mind, body, and spirit.

Mainly, the text articulates the *Trisutra* framework- *Hetu* (etiology), *Linga* (symptomatology), and *Aushadha* (therapeutics)- which provides a logical, evidence-oriented methodology for understanding disease causation, manifestation, and management. Charaka's approach integrates philosophical foundations (drawing from *Sankhya*, *Vaisheshika*, and other *Darshanas*) with practical clinical insights, including detailed discussions on anatomy, physiology, fetal development, dietetics (*Ahara*), daily and seasonal regimens (*Dinacharya* and *Ritucharya*), and ethical medical practice. Unlike purely surgical focuses in companion texts like the Sushruta Samhita, the Charaka Samhita excels in *Kayachikitsa* (internal medicine), stressing individualized treatment based on *Prakriti* (constitution), environmental factors, and patient-specific needs.

Therapeutically, Charaka Samhita advocates a multifaceted arsenal: herbal formulations, *Panchakarma* detoxification, *Rasayana* (rejuvenation) therapies for immunity and longevity, *Vajikarana* for vitality, and *Sattvavajaya* (psychotherapy or mind control) for mental well-being. These modalities address not just symptoms but root imbalances, promoting *Swasthya* (positive health) through lifestyle harmony rather than mere disease eradication. Charaka Samhita's emphasis on observation, logical reasoning, and empirical validation underscores its scientific temper, even by ancient standards.

Maharishi Charaka

Maharishi Charaka (circa 300 BCE-200 CE) was a great sage, a physician and a scholar of medicine of ancient India. History doesn't provide precise information about Charaka's birthplace or time, but evidence of his being a court physician to the Kushan emperor Kanishka is found in Chinese translations of the Tripitaka. Thus, considering Kanishka's period, Maharishi Charaka's period can be dated to the late first century to the early second century. However, there are some contradictions to Charaka being Kanishka's court physician. These include the fact that Kanishka and Asvaghosha were Buddhists, and Charaka strongly refuted Buddhist treatment theories. This evidence suggests that Kanishka's Charaka and the Ayurvedic Charaka may have been different. Panini, who lived in 500 BCE, also mentions Charaka in his treatise, suggesting that Charaka's time may have been earlier

than Panini's. However, most historians consider Charaka to have been Kanishka's court physician.¹

Nothing can be known of the nativity of Charaka. The facts described in Charaka's famous treatise, Charaka Samhita, prove that he was born in western India and received his education at Takshashila University. After discovering Buddhist manuscripts in Central Asia and China, many scholars came to the conclusion that the famous Charaka, the author of Charak Samhita belonged to Kashmir. The recension of the text available to us today was done by Acharya Dridhabala, a scholar of Kashmir. Jejjata, the author of commentary on the Charaka Samhita, was also Kashmiri. Therefore, Charaka has been identified as a native of Kashmir. But it is mentioned, by Dridhavala who added some sections to Charaka's work, that the latter was a native of "Panchanada," evidently meaning the Punjab or the country of the five rivers.²

Charaka made significant contributions to the field of Ayurveda, which is a traditional system of medicine that originated in Indian subcontinent. He wrote the book "Charaka Samhita", a book on physiology, diagnosis, and embryology in the field of Ayurvedic medicine. This book is still highly respected in the medical world. Charaka was a practical physician. He said, "How can a physician who does not understand the body of the sick person with the light of his knowledge and understanding cure the disease? Therefore, the first step is to study all the factors that affect the patient. Then it must be treated. It is more important to prevent disease than to cure it."³

Charaka emphasized that a body functions because it contains three *Dosha* or principles, namely movement (*Vata*), transformation (*Pitta*) and lubrication and stability (*Kapha*). In other words, wind, bile, and phlegm have been said to be the causes of all bodily diseases. The qualities of Passion and Darkness have, again, been indicated to be the causes of mental diseases. The *Doshas* correspond to the Western classification of humors, wind, bile, and phlegm. Charaka further emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance among the three *Doshas* and believed that disease resulted from an imbalance in these *Doshas*. These *Dosha* are produced when *Dhatus* (blood, Flesh and marrow) act upon the food eaten. Charaka also explained that the same amount of food consumed produces different *Doshas* in different bodies, meaning that one body is different from another. He argued that illness arises when the three *Doshas* in the body become imbalanced. He developed numerous medicines to balance them.⁴

Charaka was the first physician to introduce the concepts of digestion, metabolism (the process of food digestion), and body immunity. Charaka's approach to medicine was holistic and focused on understanding the body as a whole. Charaka explains that body and mind are regarded as the subjects in which health and disease co-inhere; parity of correlation being the cause of health. Charaka further explains that the correlation, adverse or absent or excessive, between time, mental faculties, and objects of the senses, constitutes in brief the threefold causes of disease affecting either the body or the mind. Here, the time is regarded to be of two kinds; first, the different states or periods of life (*Dinacharya*), as childhood, youth, manhood, old age, and second, the seasons of the year (*Ritucharya*). That which is done or borne by a person in a certain period of his life and a certain season of the year, may not be suitable to him in another period of life and another season.⁵

Charaka mentions that the bodily disease is cured by medicines founded upon acts in respect of the deities and upon reason while mental disease is cured by knowledge of the soul, knowledge of the scriptures, (exercise of) patience and memory, and the abstraction of the mind from all worldly objects. Charaka's treatments aimed to restore this balance through dietary changes, herbal remedies, lifestyle modifications, and therapies such as massage and detoxification. These defects arise when the blood, flesh and marrow react to the food consumed.⁶

Regarding genetic diseases, Charaka had recognized that genetic defects in children such as disabilities like blindness and lameness were not caused by any deficiency in the parents but by defects in the ovum or sperm. He stated that the body contains 360 bones, including teeth. Charaka believed that the heart is the body's control center and is connected to 13 main arteries throughout the body. Additionally, there are hundreds of small and large arteries that supply nutrients to all tissues and carry away waste materials. Any disorder in these arteries causes illness.⁷

Charaka says that the medicinal objects are known to be of three kinds- animal products, vegetable products, and products appertaining to the earth. Honey, vaccine secretions, bile, fat, marrow, blood, flesh, excreta, urine, skin, semen, bones, tendons, horns, nails, hoofs, hair, bristles, and the bright pigment called Goroohana, are used (as drugs) among animal products. Gold, the ordure of metals, the five metals viz., silver, copper, lead tin and iron), sand, lime, red arsenic, gems, salt, red chalk, and antimony, are indicated as drugs appertaining to the earth. The vegetable products are of four kinds- vanaspati, virudha,

vanaspatya, and oshadhi. Trees that produce fruits without flowers are called vanaspati; those that do not produce fruits without flowers are vanaspatya; those that perish upon the ripening of their fruits are oshadhi; while those that creep are called virudhas.⁸

In ancient times, experienced physicians would personally prepare medicines, perform surgeries, and diagnose diseases. Such great physicians and medical scholars were Maharishi Charaka and Sushruta. They not only promoted medicine but also recommended specific approaches and procedures for physicians. These guidelines required physicians to focus solely on treating their patients and to care for them as if they were their own children. The doctor had to determine the effect of the medicine through direct observation. Diagnosis and prognosis were made directly by looking, listening, smelling, touching the patient's body parts, and indirectly by checking the pulse. Similarly, the doctor had to look for intestinal gurgling, cracking sounds in the joints, changes in the tongue, and other symptoms. In addition to direct observation, the doctor also based his diagnosis on the patient's home, caste, lifestyle, diet, and medical history.

As a system of cure, Charaka is still regarded to be of very high authority. That system is professed and practised by a very large number of persons in India, and if it were all empiricism and quackery, it could never have survived so many centuries. The effects of medical treatment are visible and addressed to the commonest understanding. Real quackery in the treatment of disease and human suffering has very little chance of going undetected. Many persons who have enquired into the matter, without yielding to the prejudices fostered by Western culture, are of opinion that many diseases peculiar to India can be cured more effectually, cheaply, and quickly, by the aid of the intelligent native practitioner relying on Charaka than by pursuing Western systems of cure.

Charak Samhita

The earliest evidence of Indian medicine is a story recounted in the Vedas and introduction of Charaka's great work Charak Samhita. According to the story, once upon a time, several epidemics struck the earth. Concerned, all the sages convened a meeting in the foothills of the Himalayas. Bharadwaja was unanimously elected leader and sent to Indra, the king of gods, to seek medical help for the cure of the diseases. Indra imparted all the knowledge of Ayurveda to the sage Bharadwaj. Bharadwaj passed on this knowledge acquired by Indra to his disciple Punarvasu Atreya. Atreya, along with his six disciples, researched over this medical knowledge. Out of the six pupils, viz., Agnivesha, Bhela, Jatukarna, Paragara, Harita

and Kharapani, Maharishi Agnivesh was the most prominent among these disciples and compiled a treatise of medicine called Brihat Samhita. Sometime later, Agnivesha's treatise was edited and corrected by Charaka whose name it now bears (Charak Samhita). At the end of each book of the work, it is stated that this Tantra (scientific treatise) is composed by Agnivesha and corrected by Charaka.⁹

Regarding Brihat Samhita's place of composition, it is written in Charaka Samhita that in the month of *Ashadh* in Kampili, the capital of Panchal country, Acharya Punarvasu Atreya said this to his disciple Agnivesh while roaming in the forests on the banks of river Ganga. The Charaka Samhita was itself later supplemented with an extra seventeen chapters added by the author Acharya Dridhabala, a scholar of Kashmir, while retaining its name. For two millennia it remained a standard work on the subject and was translated into many foreign languages, including Arabic and Latin.¹⁰

Maharishi Charaka edited the Sanskrit text, "Charak Samhita," the most ancient text on Ayurveda. It describes preventive and curative medicines. Much of this text consists of questions and answers between Maharishi Agnivesh and his guru, Acharya Atreya Punarvasu. Agnivesh asks his guru, Atreya Punarvasu, questions about disease and treatment, and Punarvasu answers them. In this way, the entire medical knowledge has been poured into the Charaka Samhita book through the questions and answers.

Charaka Samhita contains all the principles of Ayurveda and is a complete book on the principles of Ayurveda. Charaka Samhita is a vast text that describes various aspects of Ayurvedic medicine. This text provides a comprehensive understanding of the medical science of that ancient period. The Charaka Samhita mentions curative and preventive medicines, and describes the ash and uses of metals such as gold, silver, iron, and mercury.

Actually, Charak Samhita written by Maharishi Charaka is a revised version of Agnivesha's Ayurvedic text Brihat Samhita or Agnivesh Samhita. Kashi Nath Shastri, the translator of Charaka Samhita says that Agnivesha, under the guidance of the ancient physician Acharya Punarvasu Atreya, composed an encyclopedic medical compendium Ayurvedic text Brihat Samhita or Agnivesh Samhita in the sixth century BCE and according to many others eighth century BCE. But the work received little attention. After studying and researching the Brihat Samhita collected by Agnivesha, Acharya Charaka gave it a new form by adding some places and chapters in the second century and compiled Charaka Samhita in his own name.

The Charaka Samhita consists of eight parts and 120 chapters. These 120 chapters contain approximately 2,000 verses. The Charaka Samhita describes the medical science and the entire philosophy of life, with detailed explanations of medicines and formulations. The eight parts are as follows:¹¹

- 1. Sutra Sthana, General Principles (30 chapters):** Deals with general principles, philosophy, definitions, and prevention of disease through healthy living.
- 2. Nidana Sthana, Pathology (8 chapters):** Focuses on the causes (aetiology), pathogenesis, and diagnosis of diseases.
- 3. Vimana Sthana, Specific Determination (8 chapters):** Covers specific determination of diseases, training of a physician, diet, and ethics of medical practice.
- 4. Sharira Sthana, Anatomy (8 chapters):** Discusses human anatomy, embryology, and the metaphysical aspects of the body.
- 5. Indriya Sthana, Sensory Organ Based Prognosis (12 chapters):** Elaborates on diagnosis and prognosis based on sensory responses and inauspicious signs.
- 6. Chikitsa Sthana, Therapeutics (30 chapters):** Focuses on therapeutics, specific treatments, and medicines for various ailments.
- 7. Kalpa Sthana, Pharmaceutics and Toxicology (12 chapters):** Describes pharmacology, preparation of medicines, and detoxifying procedures.
- 8. Siddhi Sthana, Success in Treatment (12 chapters):** Details success in treatment, specifically concerning the administration of Panchakarma (purification procedures).

In the Charaka Samhita, Charaka has extensively discussed various topics. For example, the origin and development of the embryo, and the anatomy of the human body. Topics like science, functioning of the body and imbalance of the three elements of the body - air, bile, phlegm or any other reason causing disorder in the functioning of the body, diagnosis, classification, scientific description, prognosis and treatment of various diseases and science of rejuvenation of the body have been described.

Charaka's knowledge regarding the reproduction and development of the foetus is modern and practical. It has been said that both man and woman are involved in embryo formation. They contribute their semen and ovum. Whether an embryo is male or female depends on the predominance of the male's semen or the female's ovum. If the resulting embryo splits into two or more parts, it gives rise to twins. The sex of each of these is determined by the relative predominance of the man's semen and the woman's menstrual fluid in the womb.¹²

Describing the development of the fetus in different months, Charaka wrote that in the first month the foetus has a sludge-like shape, in the second month it hardens, in the third month five distinct outgrowths appear and slight differentiation of organs begins. In the fourth month, differentiation of organs becomes more definite and consciousness develops in the foetus along with the functioning of the heart. This consciousness becomes more pronounced in the fifth month. Intellect also begins to develop in the sixth month. Development of organs is complete in the seventh. The child is born in the ninth or tenth month.¹³

Charaka explained that various parts of a child's body are considered to be derived from either the mother or the father. Skin, blood, flesh, navel, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, breasts, pelvis, abdomen, intestines, and marrow are derived from the mother, while hair, nails, teeth, bones, veins, and semen are derived from the father. In Charaka Samhita, various symptoms have been described to find out the sex of the foetus even before birth. If the mother's right breast produces milk first, she lifts her right foot while walking, her right eye appears bigger, she desires things with male names, she sees flowers with male names in her dreams, her face becomes bright, she wants to stay more in the company of women, her abdomen protrudes more towards the left side due to the foetus, her nature and actions appear like those of a man, then it should be understood that she will give birth to a boy and in the opposite directions, she will give birth to a girl.¹⁴

Charaka's description of the human anatomy is also satisfactory. The total number of bones in the body, including teeth and nails, is stated to be 360. The Charaka Samhita provides detailed information on which bones are located in which part of the body and how many are present. Charaka describes nine orifices in the body. Furthermore, he describes 900 nerve veins, 200 arteries, 400 muscles, 107 marmas, 200 joints, and 29,956 veins and arteries. The muscles of the body are described as the muscular mass. The Charaka Samhita provides almost no description of the structure and functions of the brain, although the lungs are mentioned. But they are not considered to be related to respiration in any way.¹⁵

Regarding physiological functions, Charaka Samhita reveals that blood flows from the heart throughout the body, and along with it, Ojas (pure or oxygenated blood) also flows. Without Ojas, humans cannot survive. The Ojas described by Charaka must certainly have been energy. Both the food we eat and our bodies are made up of five elements (*Bhutas*) called earth, fire, water, air, and space. In the body, these five elements exist in the form of substances (*Dhatus*) called juice, blood, flesh, fat, bone marrow, and semen. The function of

food is to nourish these *Dhatus*, maintain their balance, and continue the digestive process. The food that is eaten first gets converted into a juice, then, into blood, flesh, and other metals. Medicines prescribed for the treatment of diseases are also composed of the five elements, just like the body. Charaka also explained that every substance in the world possesses hidden medicinal properties.¹⁶

The Charaka Samhita also describes the use of animal meat as medicine. This indicates that meat consumption was common at that time, and a thorough knowledge of the properties of meat was available. Deer meat, burrowing monitor lizard meat, and fish like Rohu are described as beneficial. Similarly, the Charaka Samhita also describes the fats of many animals, birds, and fish. In addition to meat, Charaka also describes vegetables. Describing the properties of Neem leaves, he states that they calm phlegm and bile. It also describes the leaves of mung beans, peas, black gram, and other plants. Various types of tubers, such as potatoes, are also described in the Charaka Samhita. It also describes the flowers of the semar tree, beans, spinach, mustard, lotus flowers and stems, bathua, and nuts like almonds and walnuts.¹⁷

Charaka Samhita, while explaining the difference between wine and liquor, describes wine as a source of joy. Their merits and demerits are also highlighted. Charaka Samhita states that proper consumption of alcohol dispels fear, grief, fatigue, and brings joy. Consuming alcohol properly, when consumed by virtuous individuals, is as beneficial as nectar. Charaka also elaborates on the merits and demerits of rain and river water. Rainwater in different seasons has different properties. Similarly, the water of some mountain rivers is beneficial, while that of others is harmful, causing head diseases, heart disease, and leprosy.¹⁸

Charaka stated that people suffer from many diseases due to laziness. Diabetes has been attributed to eating heavy oily food, sleeping too much, and sitting on a cushioned bed for long periods. People who work hard digest whatever they eat, and remain disease-free and happy. Charaka also described instruments and mantras for treating patients. Charaka also described worms, which cause various skin diseases. He also had knowledge of blood worms (bacteria), etc. He also described head and heart diseases caused by bacteria.¹⁹

Charaka stated that excessive worry, alcohol consumption, and insomnia contribute to tuberculosis. He described 18 types of tuberculosis, including bone and flesh decay. He also described heart diseases. He also described heartburn, blueness in the mouth, sour vomiting,

fatigue without exertion, dizziness, and sweating are pitta-related heart diseases, while feeling listless, feeling heavy in the chest, and lack of interest in prayer are phlegm-related heart diseases. These are all caused by bacteria.²⁰

Charaka also describes psychology and mental illness in detail, attributing them to an imbalance of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. If this imbalance is severe, a person becomes unconscious. Charaka stated that people who are timid, unhappy, affected by lust, anger, greed, joy, fear, and fickle nature are susceptible to insanity. He stated that dreaming of fickle, unstable, or blasphemous figures is a precursor to insanity. Believing oneself to be more powerful than one really is, keeping the body dirty, aversion to cleanliness, unreasonable movements of the body, laughing, singing, throwing mud at others, and punching others are also symptoms of insanity.²¹

The Charaka Samhita concludes by stating that the medical knowledge described in it is also found in other Ayurvedic texts, and that knowledge not contained in it cannot be found anywhere else. This suggests that the Charaka Samhita is a complete repository of medical knowledge from ancient times.

In his treatise, Charaka Samhita, Charaka writes about medical students that they should bathe and meditate to purify their bodies. They should perform a yajna (sacrifice) to appease the gods. Then, seeking the blessings of their guru, they should pledge: “I will remain a lifelong celibate. I will dress like the sages. I will not harbor any animosity towards anyone. I will eat simple food. I will not commit violence. I will not neglect the sick. I will consider serving them my duty. I will not speak ill of the family of the patient I treat. I will not boast of my knowledge. I will always consider my guru as my guru.”²²

Additionally, Charaka also detailed the duties of students in the Charaka Samhita. Among these, the instructions given to a physician by Charaka at the end of his training are noteworthy: “If you desire success in your work, wealth, honor, and attainment of heaven after death, you must pray every morning upon rising and before going to bed for the welfare of all living beings, especially cows and Brahmins. You must strive with a true heart for the health of the sick. Even at the cost of your own life, do not deceive your patient, do not drink alcohol, do not commit sins, do not have bad friends, be soft-spoken and thoughtful, and always strive to increase your knowledge. If you have to visit a patient’s home, you should not engage your words, mind, intellect, or senses on anything other than treating the patient.

Do not discuss matters at home with others, nor should you reveal the patient's condition to anyone who might harm him.”²³

Influence on Contemporary Frameworks

While the Indian system of medicine was being practiced for many centuries before CE, and improved through the 1st century CE, the transfer of knowledge took place in several ways in the 6th century CE to Iran, Syria and Greece. Dioscorides, a Greek physician in 507 CE wrote a 5 volume *Materia Medica* with a large number of Indian herbs and recipe of drugs.

In contemporary Ayurvedic frameworks, the *Charaka Samhita* continues to exert profound influence. Its holistic, patient-centered, and preventive paradigm resonates strongly amid modern challenges like chronic lifestyle disorders, mental health issues, and the limitations of reductionist biomedicine. Principles such as Prakriti-based personalization align with emerging fields of precision and integrative medicine, while concepts of Rasayana and immune modulation find parallels in nutraceuticals, antioxidants, and psychoneuroimmunology. Efforts to globalize Ayurveda- through evidence-based research, integration with modern diagnostics, and public health applications- frequently draw directly from its teachings on ethics, sustainability, and the non-finality of medical knowledge (the science of life shall never attain finality). Educational curricula, clinical protocols, and wellness practices in India and beyond still reference it as a guiding “timeless gem,” bridging ancient wisdom with innovative, integrative healthcare models.

The *Charaka Samhita* remains not merely a historical artifact but a living, dynamic system of Indian medicine whose holistic, individualized, and preventive paradigm offers valuable insights for addressing the limitations of reductionist modern medicine and advancing global health and wellness in the 21st century.

The *Charaka Samhita* stands not merely as a compendium of ancient remedies but as a sophisticated blueprint for scientific inquiry. By shifting the focus of healing from supernatural intervention to the observable laws of cause and effect, the text established a rationalist tradition that predates modern evidence-based medicine by millennia. Its greatest contribution to the history of science is the integration of the proofs, particularly reasoning through experimental planning, which allowed physicians to validate theories through logic and clinical observation. Furthermore, the text's emphasis on open scientific debate and the

rejection of dogma in favor of empirical success highlights a remarkably modern scientific temperament.

Analyzing the Charaka Samhita through a contemporary lens reveals that the foundational principles of medical ethics, personalized diagnostics, and systemic validation are deeply rooted in this ancient scholarship. Ultimately, Charaka's legacy is the democratization of medical truth through evidence and logic, proving that the roots of the modern scientific method extend far into the classical Indian intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Charaka Samhita is far more than a historical relic; it represents a sophisticated, enduring system of Indian medicine that prioritizes harmony, individuality, and proactive well-being. Its principles of balance, diagnostics, and multifaceted therapeutics have shaped Ayurveda's classical foundations while informing its evolution in contemporary frameworks- offering valuable insights for addressing 21st century health complexities through personalized, preventive, and mind-body integrative approaches. As global interest in holistic and sustainable healthcare grows, the text's rational, ethical, and humanistic vision reaffirms Ayurveda's relevance, inviting further scientific validation and cross-cultural dialogue to enrich both traditional and modern medical paradigms. Ultimately, Charaka's legacy reminds us that true health is not merely the absence of disease but the cultivation of a vibrant, balanced life in tune with nature and self.

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