

ESSENCE OF THE  
HEART SUTRA

THE DALAI LAMA'S  
HEART OF WISDOM TEACHINGS

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY GESHE THUPTEN JINPA

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THE DALAI LAMA'S  
HEART OF WISDOM TEACHINGS

TENZIN GYATSO  
THE FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA



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## *Editor's Preface*

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THE SHORT Buddhist scripture entitled the *Heart of Wisdom*, the basis of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings presented in this book, is one of the most sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhism that traditionally flourished in India, China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and many regions of central Asia, including what is today modern Afghanistan. For more than two millennia this scripture has played an extremely important role in the religious lives of millions of Buddhists. It has been memorized, chanted, studied, and meditated upon by those aspiring to attain what Mahayana Buddhism describes as the perfection of wisdom. Even today, the chanting of this sutra can be heard in Tibetan monasteries, where it is recited in the characteristically deep overtone voice, in Japanese Zen temples, where the chanting is done in tune with rhythmic beating of a drum, and in Chinese and the Vietnamese temples, where it is sung in melodious tunes.

Often referred to by its short title, the *Heart Sutra*, the interpretation of the subtle meaning of the various passages of this sacred text has produced numerous commentarial treatises over the centuries. In His Holiness' discourse, we are brought face to face with the rich history of textual interpretation that exists in a great spiritual tradition

like Buddhism. So richly textured is the Dalai Lama's discourse presented here that this book effectively serves as a comprehensive introduction to the central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

Historically, the *Heart of Wisdom* belongs to a well-known class of Buddhist scriptures known as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which the noted European scholar Edward Conze, who dedicated much of his life in translating these scriptures, has suggested was composed some time between 100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, these scriptures deal with the topic of the perfection of wisdom, which articulates the deep insight into what Buddhists call emptiness. However, as can be seen from both the Dalai Lama's discourse on the text and from the fifteenth-century Tibetan commentary provided in the appendix, there is a further, "hidden" level of meaning to the text that pertains to the progressive stages of spiritual development eventually culminating in the attainment of full enlightenment. Furthermore, these commentaries also demonstrate how the altruistic intention to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, which is the fundamental motive behind a Mahayana Buddhist's spiritual quest, is deeply embedded in the meaning of the *Heart Sutra*. In other words, the central theme of these Perfection of Wisdom sutras is found to be a profound union of compassion and wisdom.

Perhaps to a reader unfamiliar with the Mahayana tradition, it may seem perplexing that a text such as the *Heart Sutra*, whose core message is a string of negative statements, can be a source of such deep spiritual inspiration to so many people. To dissolve this perplexity it is necessary to have some understanding of the role the language of negation plays in these Buddhist scriptures. From its earliest evolution, one of the central teachings of Buddhism has been to gain freedom from our bondage to clinging, especially to a belief in

some kind of enduring reality, whether it be the external world or the internal world of one's own personal existence. According to Buddhism, the source of our suffering lies in a deeply embedded tendency to grasp at enduring realities where there are none, particularly the tendency to grasp at an enduring sense of self. It is this grasping that gives rise to dysfunction in our interaction with our fellow beings and with the world around us. Since this tendency is deeply rooted in the psyche, nothing short of a radical deconstruction of our naïve understanding of self and world can lead us to true spiritual freedom. The *Heart Sutra's* categorical negation of the intrinsic existence of all things, especially the five personal aggregates, can be seen not only as an extension of this key Buddhist wisdom but in fact as a supreme example of such wisdom. This is the key to the overwhelming veneration of this short text in the Mahayana Buddhist world.

In addition to being utilized for deep meditative contemplation on emptiness, the sutra is often chanted as a means of overcoming various factors that obstruct spiritual progress. For example, it is customary in the Tibetan tradition to recite the sutra at the beginning of every teaching session. I remember with fondness the palpable sense of anticipation I used to feel as a teenager when the *Heart Sutra* was recited at the large congregation of monks and lay people attending the Dalai Lama's teachings in Dharamsala, India in the early 1970s. The recitation concludes with the statement "May all obstacles be averted; may they be no more; may they be pacified," which is recited while clapping three times. The idea is that much of what we perceive as obstacles actually stem from the deeply ingrained clinging to our own existence and to the self-centeredness this produces. By reflecting deeply upon the essentially empty nature

of all things, we undercut any basis for the so-called obstacles to take root within us. Thus meditation on emptiness, undertaken often on the basis of reciting the *Heart Sutra*, is considered a powerful method for overcoming obstacles.<sup>2</sup>

Today, I am deeply honored to serve as the translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama's authoritative discourse on this sacred Buddhist text. I feel that, in my humble role as the Dalai Lama's translator, I have been given a precious opportunity to be part of a noble initiative to help enable others, especially millions of fellow Buddhists worldwide, to appreciate the deep insights embodied in this short sacred text.

There are many others whose role has been critical for the success of this project. First and foremost, I would like to express my deep admiration to His Holiness the Dalai Lama for always being such a great exemplar of the essence of the Buddha's teaching. I thank the Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), especially its Spiritual Director, Ven. Zopa Rinpoche and his center, Land of Medicine Buddha, for organizing His Holiness' teachings in Mountain View, California, the transcripts of which form the primary basis of this book. Supplemental material came from a talk on the *Heart Sutra* given by His Holiness in 1998 sponsored by Three Rivers Dharma in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I thank Patrick Lambelet for his initial editing, Gene Smith for locating the Tibetan text of Jamyang Galo's commentary, and David Kittelstrom and Josh Bartok, editors at Wisdom Publications, whose help has been invaluable in making the English text of this book clear and readable. Whatever merits there might be in this endeavor, may they help alleviate the suffering of all beings; may they help us humans to create a more peaceful world.

Thupten Jinpa, Montreal, 2002

*Part I*  
Buddhism in Context

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## *The Quest for Inner Development*

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TIME IS ALWAYS moving forward. With each passing moment, beginning from the instant of our birth, we come closer to the end, to our death. That is our nature, and the nature of the universe. As spiritually minded people, it is essential for us to constantly check and examine ourselves, to see how we are living every moment of our lives. In my own case, the major portion of my life is already gone. But, although I am a lazy practitioner of Buddhism, I can see that each year there is some progress in my life. Above all, I try to be a genuine follower of Buddha Shakyamuni and a good Buddhist monk. Of course, even Buddhist monks make mistakes in our lives and practices, but I think I have made some contribution to this world we share, especially to the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

In spiritual matters, we should not allow ourselves to be too easily content, because truly there is no limit to our spiritual potential. All of us—any of us—can develop infinitely; and any of us can attain buddhahood. The mind we possess right now, though it may presently be full of ignorance and suffering, can eventually become the mind of an enlightened being, of a buddha. Where our material possessions are concerned, finding contentment makes sense. But

since there is no limit to our spiritual potential and there is a limit to the span of our life, we must make every effort to utilize what little time we have as well as we possibly can with this precious human lifetime.

In being human, we are all the same. On that level, none of us are strangers. There are no fundamental differences between any of us. You experience many emotions; some emotions help you, others hinder you. The same is true for me. Within our ever-changing experiences, all of us are constantly experiencing different emotions—sometimes anger, sometimes jealousy, sometimes love, sometimes fear. You experience many thoughts; you have the potential to analyze, to investigate the long-term and short-term prospects for your life. The same is true of me. Within our ever-changing experiences, we all constantly experience different perceptions—color, odor, taste, feel, sound, even awareness itself. These things function similarly in each of us.

Of course it is also possible to find differences among human beings. We each have individual experiences not shared by everyone. For instance, you may have great skill with computers, while I have none. Likewise, since I have no mathematical training, I may have great difficulty with certain things that come quite easily to you. But these kinds of differences in individual experience are minor. You and I may hold different beliefs—about the universe, about reality, about religion. And even within a belief, within a faith tradition, for instance, there are all sorts of differences between people. But such differences in belief, just like differences in experience, are minor compared to our common humanity. The essential thing is that we are all the same in being human—thinking, feeling, and

being aware. We all share this one planet, and we are all members of one big human family.

And I think too that some human experiences are universal. For instance, when someone smiles at you, you feel happy. In the exact same way, I feel happy when you smile at me. Both you and I seek out what we think is good for us, and we avoid what we think will harm us. This is basic human nature.

In the realm of the external material world, we are aware of what is good for us and what harms us. Then, on the basis of this careful analysis and clear knowledge, we try to create a joyful life, a successful life, the happy life that we all know is our birthright. Similarly, in the vast realm of our thoughts and emotions, we need careful analysis to develop clear awareness of what is harmful and what is helpful. So we must work to increase the positive elements of our minds and weaken the force of the negative elements. The positive elements enhance our happiness; the negative elements undermine it. Thus, a clear understanding of our inner world is of the utmost importance.

Since happiness cannot be achieved through material conditions alone, we need other means by which we can fulfill our aspirations. All the world religions offer means for fulfilling these aspirations, but I also believe that such means can be developed independent of any religion or any belief. What is required is recognizing the immense potential we have as human beings and learning to utilize it. In fact, today, even in modern science, there is a growing recognition of the relationship between the body and the mind and an emerging understanding of how our mental attitudes impact our physical health and well-being.

One very important faculty that we human beings have at our disposal to help find happiness and overcome suffering is our intelligence. Our intelligence can help us overcome suffering and find happiness, but our intelligence can also cause problems. Using our intelligence, we build homes and grow food, but through our intelligence we also create anxiety and fear. Our intelligence gives us the ability to remember the past, and it allows us to envision possibilities for the future—both good ones and bad. We cannot truly overcome unhappiness by physical comfort alone; ultimately, the unhappiness created by human intelligence can only be alleviated by intelligence itself. Therefore, using our intelligence appropriately is essential.

To do this, we must conjoin our intelligence to a warm, open heart. We must bring to our rationality a sense of compassion, of caring for one another, of sharing. These mental qualities transform our intelligence into a powerful positive force. The mind becomes broader and more spacious, and even when unfortunate incidents happen, the effect on our composure is minimal. We are able to care about the well-being of others and not just ourselves. In fact, as human beings, we are by nature social animals, and our happiness and even survival depend upon our interaction and cooperation. So when positive emotions guide intelligence, it become constructive. The warm, compassionate heart is the basis for peace of mind, without which the mind will always be uncomfortable and disturbed.

Anger and hatred, they destroy our inner peace. Compassion, forgiveness, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, contentment, self-discipline, these are the basis of peace—both external peace and inner mental peace. Only through strengthening these inner good qualities can a genuine, lasting peace develop. This is what I

mean by spiritual development. I sometimes also describe this as inner disarmament. In fact, in all levels of our existence—family life, social life, working life, and political life—inner disarmament is, above all, what humanity needs.



## *Religion in Today's World*

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### MANY TEACHINGS, MANY PATHS

FINDING TRUE FULFILLMENT does not depend on following any particular religion or holding any particular belief. Many people do, however, look for fulfillment within religious practice or faith. When we remain isolated from one another we sometimes get distorted pictures of traditions or beliefs other than the ones we ourselves happen to uphold; in other words, we may mistakenly believe our own religion is somehow the only valid one. In fact, before I left Tibet and had close contact with other religions and other religious leaders, I myself held such views! But ultimately, I have come to see that all traditions have great potential and can play a very important role in benefiting humanity. All the world religions contain tools to address our basic aspiration to overcome suffering and increase happiness. In this chapter, we'll examine these tools.

Some religions have sophisticated philosophical analyses; some have extensive ethical teachings; some place a greater emphasis on faith. If we observe the teachings of the world's major faith traditions, however, we can discern two main dimensions of religion. One is what could be called the metaphysical or philosophical

dimension, which explains why we are the way we are and why certain religious practices are prescribed. The second dimension pertains to the practice of morality or ethical discipline. One could say that the ethical teachings of a faith tradition are the conclusions supported and validated by the process of the metaphysical or philosophical thinking. Although the world's religions differ widely in terms of metaphysics and philosophy, the conclusions these differing philosophies arrive at—that is, their ethical teachings—show a high degree of convergence. In this sense, we can say that regardless of whatever metaphysical explanations religious traditions employ, they all reach similar conclusions. In some form or other, the philosophies of all world religions emphasize love, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and the importance of self-discipline. Through interfaith and interpersonal communication, sharing, and respect, we can learn to appreciate the valuable qualities taught by all religions, and the ways in which all religions can benefit humanity.

Within each path, we can find people who are truly dedicated to the welfare of others out of a deep sense of compassion and love. Over the past few decades, I've met quite a number of people from many different traditions—Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews. And within every tradition, one finds wonderful, warm-hearted, sensible people—people like Mother Teresa, who completely dedicated her life to the well-being of the poorest of the world's poor, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who dedicated his life to the peaceful struggle for equality. Clearly, all traditions have the power to bring out the best in human potential. Yet different traditions use different approaches.

Now, we may ask, “Why is this so? Why is there such metaphysical and philosophical diversity among the world’s religions?” Such diversity can be found not only among different religions but also *within* religions as well. Even within Buddhism—even within the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni himself—there is a great diversity of teachings. In Buddha’s more philosophical teachings, we find this diversity to be most pronounced; in some cases, the teachings seem even to contradict each other!

This points, I think, to one of the most important truths about spiritual teachings: spiritual teachings must be appropriate to the individual being taught. The Buddha recognized among his followers a diversity of mental dispositions, spiritual inclinations, and interests, and saw that in order to suit this diversity he had to teach differently in different contexts. No matter how powerful a particular teaching may be or how “correct” a philosophical view may be, if it is not suitable to the individual hearing it, it has no value. A skillful spiritual teacher will thus judge the appropriateness of a given teaching for a given individual and teach accordingly.

We can draw an analogy to the use of medicine. Antibiotics, for instance, are immensely powerful; they are immensely valuable in treating a wide variety of diseases—but they are useless in treating a broken leg. A broken leg must be properly set in a cast. Furthermore, even in cases where antibiotics are indeed the appropriate treatment, if a doctor were to give an infant the same amount of medicine as she would a fully grown man, the child might well die!

In the same way, we can see that the Buddha himself—because he recognized the diversity of mental dispositions, interests, and

mental capabilities of his followers—gave diverse teachings. Looking at all the world's religions in this light, I feel a deep conviction that all of the traditions are beneficial, each of them uniquely serving the needs of their followers.

Let's look at the similarities another way. Not all religions posit the existence of God, of a creator; but those that do emphasize that the devout should love God with all their heart. How might we determine whether someone loves God sincerely? Surely, we would examine that person's behavior and attitude toward fellow human beings, toward the rest of God's creation. If someone shows genuine love and compassion toward fellow human brothers and sisters, and toward the Earth itself, then I think we can be sure that that person truly demonstrates love for God. It's clear that when someone really respects God's message, they emulate God's love for humanity. Conversely, I believe that the faith of someone someone who professes belief in God and yet shows no love or compassion toward other human beings is highly questionable. When we look in these ways, we see that genuine faith in God is a powerful way to develop the positive human qualities of love and compassion.

Let's look at another differing aspect of world religions: belief in a previous life or a next life. Not all religions assert the existence of these things. Some, like Christianity, acknowledge a next life, perhaps in heaven or in hell, but not a previous one. According to the Christian view, this life, the present life right now, has been created directly by God. I can well imagine that if we really believe this sincerely, it would grant a feeling of deep intimacy with God. Surely, being aware that our very lives are God's creation, we would develop a profound reverence for God and the wish to live our lives

thoroughly in accord with God's intentions, thereby actualizing our highest human potential.

Other religions or people may emphasize that we are each responsible for everything we create in our lives. This kind of faith can also be very effective in helping actualize our potential for goodness, for it requires that individuals take total responsibility for their lives, with all the consequences resting on their own shoulders. People who genuinely think in this way will become more disciplined, and take on full responsibility for practicing compassion and love. So while the approach is different, the result is more or less the same.

## MAINTAINING ONE'S OWN TRADITION

When I reflect in this way, my admiration for the world's great spiritual traditions increases, and I can deeply appreciate their value. It's clear that these religions have served the spiritual needs of millions of people in the past, continue to do so at present, and will continue to do so in the future. Realizing this, I encourage people to maintain their spiritual tradition, even if they choose to learn from others, like Buddhism, as well. Changing one's religion is a serious matter, and it should not be taken lightly. Given that different religious traditions evolved in accordance with specific historical, cultural, and social contexts, a particular tradition may be more suitable to a particular person in a particular environment. Only the individual knows which religion is most suitable for him or her. It is therefore vital not to proselytize, propagating only one's own religion, asserting that it alone is the best one or the right one.

Because of this, when I give Buddhist teachings to Western people of different religious backgrounds, I usually feel a little

apprehensive. It's not my wish to propagate Buddhism. At the same time, it is quite natural that out of millions of people, some may feel that the Buddhist approach is more suitable for them, more effective for them. And even if an individual feeling this way gets to the point where he or she is considering adopting the Buddha's teachings, it is still very important to examine those teachings and that decision carefully. Only after thinking very deeply, examining very thoroughly, can one really determine that the Buddhist approach is, in one's own case, more suitable and effective.

Nonetheless, I think it's better to have some kind of faith, some kind of deeper belief, than none at all. I firmly believe that someone who thinks only of this life and only of worldly gain simply cannot attain lasting satisfaction. That kind of purely materialistic approach will not bring lasting happiness. When young and both physically and mentally fit, an individual might feel completely self-sufficient, completely in control, and thus conclude that no deeper faith or deeper understanding is necessary. But with time, things inevitably change; people get sick, grow old, die. These inevitabilities, or perhaps some unexpected tragedy that money can't fix, may clearly point out the limitation of this worldly view. In those cases, a spiritual approach, such as the Buddhist one, may become more suitable.

## SHARING EACH OTHER'S TRADITIONS

In this diverse world, with its varied religious traditions, it's enormously valuable for practitioners of different religions to cultivate a genuine respect for each other's tradition based on dialogue. At the beginning of such a dialogue, it's important that all the participants fully recognize not only the many areas of convergence between each

other's faith traditions, but more crucially, that they recognize and respect the differences between the traditions. Furthermore, we should look at the specific causes and conditions that gave rise to the different faith traditions—the historical, cultural, sociological, even personal, factors that affect a religion's evolution. In a sense, these things help us see *why* a particular religion came into being. Then, having clarified the differences and the origins, we look at the religions from a different perspective: becoming aware of how differing religious philosophies and practices can give rise to similar results. By entering into interfaith dialogue in this way, we develop genuine respect and admiration for each other's religious traditions.

There are, in fact, two kinds of interfaith dialogues: ones that take place on a fairly academic level, primarily concerned with intellectual differences and similarities, and ones that occur between genuine practitioners of different traditions. In my own experience, this latter type of dialogue has been of especially great help in deepening my own appreciation of other traditions.

Interfaith dialogue is just one of several ways that we can share in each other's traditions. We might also do this by making pilgrimages, journeying to sacred places of different traditions—and, if possible, praying or practicing together, or engaging in communal silent meditation. Whenever I have the opportunity, I pay my respects as a pilgrim at the holy places of different traditions. In this spirit, I have gone to the temples of Jerusalem, to the Lourdes sanctuary in France, and to various holy places in India.

Many religions espouse world peace and global harmony. Consequently, another means through which we can appreciate each other's religions is by seeing religious leaders come together and hearing them express this same value from the same speaking platform.

Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa pointed out to me an additional way through which we can share in each other's religious strength: wherever there is a disaster or some great tragedy in the world, people from different traditions can join together to help the people suffering, thereby showing the heart of each religion in action. I think this is a great idea, and furthermore, on a practical level, it is a wonderful opportunity for people of different traditions to get to know one another. I promised Bishop Tutu that in future discussions of interfaith sharing I would mention this idea—and now I am fulfilling my promise to him!

Thus there are grounds for promoting dialogue and harmony between religions, and there are methods. Establishing and maintaining this harmony is vitally important because without it people can become alienated from one another quite easily. In the worst case, conflict and hostility arise, leading to bloodshed and even war. Often some kind of religious difference or religious intolerance is at the root of many such conflicts. And yet, religion is supposed to cool hostility down, to ease conflict and bring peace. It is tragic when religion itself becomes just another basis for creating strife. When this happens, then religion has no value to humanity—in fact, it is harmful. Yet I don't believe we should do away with religion; religion can still be a basis for developing peace among the people of the world.

Furthermore, although we can point to great advances in technology, even in what we might call “quality of life,” we still have certain difficulties that technology and money cannot solve: we feel anxiety, fear, anger, sadness at loss or separation. In addition to this, we have many day-to-day complaints—I certainly do, and I imagine you do as well.

These are certain fundamental aspects of simply being human that have remained unchanged for thousands, perhaps even millions, of years. These things are only overcome through peace of mind. And, in some form or other, all religions deal with this. So even in the twenty-first century, the various religious traditions still have a very important role—to provide us peace of mind.

We need religion in order to develop both this inner peace and peace among the world's peoples; that is the essential role of religion today. And in pursuit of this goal, harmony among the different traditions becomes essential.

## LEARNING FROM OTHER TRADITIONS

Though I don't recommend that a person abandon his or her native religion, I believe that a follower of one tradition can certainly incorporate into his or her own spiritual practice certain methods for spiritual transformation found in other traditions. For example, some of my Christian friends, while remaining deeply committed to their own tradition, incorporate ancient Indian methods for cultivating single-pointedness of mind through meditative concentration. They also borrow some tools from Buddhism for training the mind through meditation, visualizations related to developing compassion, and practices that aid with increasing patience. These devout Christians, while remaining deeply committed to their own spiritual tradition, embrace aspects and methods from other teachings. This, I think, is beneficial to them and wise.

This borrowing can function the other way around as well. Buddhists can incorporate elements of the Christian tradition into their practice—for instance, the tradition of community service. In

the Christian tradition, monks and nuns have a long history of social work, particularly in the fields of health and education. In providing service to the greater human community through social work, Buddhism lags far behind Christianity. In fact, one of my German friends, himself a Buddhist, told me of his observation that over the past forty years, although many large Tibetan monasteries have been built in Nepal, very few hospitals or schools have been built by the monasteries. He remarked that if these monasteries were Christian, then along with an increase in the number of monasteries, there would surely have been an increase in the number of schools and healthcare facilities as well. A Buddhist can express nothing in response to such a statement other than full agreement.

Buddhists can certainly learn a great deal from Christian service. On the other hand, some among my Christian friends express a deep interest in the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. To these Christian brothers and sisters, I have observed that the teaching of emptiness—the teaching that all things are devoid of any absolute, independent existence—is unique to Buddhism, and therefore perhaps a deeply committed Christian practitioner might be wise not to delve too deeply into this aspect of Buddhist teaching. The reason for this caution is that if someone begins to delve deeply into the Buddhist teaching of emptiness and truly pursues it, it can undermine one's faith in a creator—an absolute, independent, eternal being that is, in short, not empty.

Many people profess deep reverence for both Buddhism and Christianity, and specifically for the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni and Jesus Christ. Without a doubt, it's of great value to develop profound respect for the teachers and teachings of all world religions; and at a certain beginning stage one can be, for instance,

both a practicing Buddhist and a practicing Christian. But if one pursues any path deeply enough, it eventually becomes necessary to embrace one spiritual path together with its underlying metaphysics.

Here, we can draw an analogy to the pursuit of education. We begin with a broad-based education; from grammar school perhaps through college, almost everyone initially studies a similar basic curriculum. But if we wish to pursue advanced training, perhaps a doctorate or some technical skill, we can do so only in a particular field. Likewise, from the point of view of the individual spiritual practitioner, as one goes deeper into one's spiritual path, practicing one religion and one truth becomes important. So, while it is essential that human society as a whole embrace the reality of many paths and many truths, for an individual, it may be better to follow one path and one truth.