



T I B E T A N



C L A S S I C S

# WISDOM OF THE KADAM MASTERS

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY

*Thupten Jinpa*

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## Preface

WISDOM OF THE KADAM MASTERS is the second volume in the new series *Tibetan Classics*, which aims to make available accessible paperback editions of key Tibetan Buddhist works in English translation. The main selection in this volume is the much-loved twelfth-century work known as *Sayings of the Kadam Masters*. That these celebrated sayings continue to resonate powerfully for those on the spiritual path nearly a millennium after their utterance shows that they capture something profound about our yearning. The next three selections in this special anthology, chapters from the Father Teachings of the *Book of Kadam*, present lively exchanges between the Indian master Atiśa and his Tibetan heir, Dromtönpa. The final selection is a chapter from the Son Teachings of the *Book of Kadam*, an entertaining tale of one of Master Drom's previous lives.

These selections, so revered in the Tibetan tradition, have been drawn from the larger hardcover volume entitled *The Book of Kadam: The Core Texts*, which I had the privilege to translate into English for *The Library of Tibetan Classics*. In this volume, however, I have expanded the contextualizing materials for the general reader. These include a general introduction, explanations specific to each of the three sections, biographical notes on the authors whose sayings are featured in the volume, as well as an explanatory glossary. Together, these materials provide historical and cultural context as well as an overview of the central themes of the individual texts, allowing the reader to engage with the words in a more meaningful way.

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I would like to express my deep gratitude, first and foremost, to my two spiritual teachers, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the late Kyabjé Zemé Rinpoché, both of whom helped bring the teachings of the Kadam masters to life for me. My heartfelt thanks go to Barry Hershey, Connie Hershey, and the Hershey Family Foundation, whose support made it possible for me to translate the larger volume from which the texts selected here were drawn. I must also thank Pierre and Pamela Omidyar, who through a special grant enabled me to develop this particular volume for general readers.

Let me also take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to Nita Ing and the Ing Family Foundation and to Eric Colombel and the Tsadra Foundation for their ongoing support of translating multiple volumes from *The Library of Tibetan Classics*. I also thank David Kittelstrom, our longtime editor at Wisdom Publications on the classics series, for his incisive editing of my English; Tim McNeill and his team at Wisdom for their dedication to excellence; and my wife Sophie Boyer Langri for her unwavering support of my work.

Thupten Jinpa  
Montreal, 2012

## Introduction

*“Even if we try to do something, what needs doing  
beyond simply observing our own minds?”*

—GÖNPAWA<sup>1</sup>

THE PHRASE “the Kadam masters” evokes, for many Tibetans like myself who grew up within a monastic environment, a sense of a spiritual golden age in Tibet—an idyllic image of a spiritual community consisting of wise monks dedicated to a life of deep spiritual quest and mental cultivation with a sense of abandon and total freedom. These Tibetan masters are famed particularly for their pithy spiritual sayings, short poignant utterances that capture essential teachings in digestible bites. In these sayings one unmistakably detects a note of courage and decisiveness, an absence of confusion about the priorities of a well-lived life, as well as a clear understanding of what a truly happy life consists of, all grounded in an uncompromising adherence to the altruistic ideal of universal compassion—a deeply felt, genuine concern for the welfare of all beings. The spirit of these pithy sayings are illustrated by the following well-known saying:

Inside the house of a person with a sense of abandon  
sleeps someone who is totally at ease;  
those ridden with hopes and fears fail to notice this.

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Inside the house of a person who is content  
sleeps someone who is truly rich;  
those ridden with greed fail to notice this.<sup>2</sup>

These lines succinctly convey with powerful imagery two universal spiritual principles—(1) that a mind no longer imprisoned in the perpetual cycle of expectations, hopes, and fears is a mind that is truly at ease, and (2) that those who are contented in mind are truly rich, for no matter how much we might have materially, we are not rich in the truest sense of the word if we still crave for more. In contrast, a mind caught in obsessive self-focused thoughts of hopes and fears is robbed of any space for happiness to take root. Similarly, a perpetually discontented state of mind chained to craving for more is deprived of any chance to truly appreciate what one has and instead focuses negatively on what one does not.

Today modern science is increasingly coming to recognize the crucial role our minds play in determining the quality of our lives, especially when it comes to questions of happiness and suffering. To a large extent, the way we experience the world is significantly shaped by the way we see ourselves and the world around us, and by the attitudes and values with which we relate to both. This, in turn, influences how we act and react. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often reminds his audiences of the need to appreciate how the most important factor for personal happiness lies within. Yes, material facilities are important; yes, companionship, good health, and good reputation are also important factors of happiness. None of these guarantee our happiness. In contrast, if we have a genuine inner peace, then even in the midst of material hardships we can maintain a sense of well-being. Most of what the Kadam masters have to say, in one way or another, relates to this important nexus of thought, emotion, and action.

When the Kadam master Gönpawa was on his deathbed, we

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are told, he gave the following four brief counsels to his grieving disciple Phuchungwa:

Teach others what you practice;  
practice what you preach;  
even at a place where you might be staying for a single day,  
do not act as an outside guest but constantly remember  
your teachers and their instructions;  
and always cultivate limitless loving-kindness toward other  
sentient beings.<sup>3</sup>

Once again, in a few simple lines we see important universal spiritual principles echoed with great efficiency. “Teach others what *you* practice” underlines the important ethos that we should only teach others things that we ourselves have gained some degree of mastery in. In spiritual matters, it shouldn’t be the case of the blind leading the blind. “Practice what you preach” encapsulates the important principle that, in matters of spiritual practice, the teacher is as much a student as his disciples. This line echoes one of the four factors of sustaining other’s minds—namely, “acting in accord with your own advice.” The advice that we should not act as an outside guest even at a place where we might happen to stay only for a day makes the point that when it comes to mindful awareness, there is no place or occasion for exceptions. A true spiritual practitioner will not use being away from his or her normal meditative environment as an excuse for laxity. Finally, Master Gönpawa reminds us that at the end of the day what matters most is caring for the needs and welfare of other sentient beings—the practice of loving-kindness.

One well-known Kadam saying is Master Ben Güngyal’s encapsulation of what he saw to be the heart of a spiritual practitioner’s task. He states, “I have no task other than to stand guard at the gate of the afflictions’ fortress, holding the spear of the antidotes. If the afflictions are vigilant, I remain vigilant. If

they are relaxed, I remain relaxed.”<sup>4</sup> In essence, what Ben Gün-gyal is saying is this: the heart of the spiritual aspirant’s practice is to cultivate greater self-awareness, especially with respect to thoughts and emotions, and to learn to deal with internal dissonances on that basis. I particularly like the imagery of standing guard at the gateway of the mind. For through our mind we not only interact with the world, but to a large extent, we create it. Contemporary research in the psychological sciences is increasingly confirming the basic insight of contemplatives: our perceptions and attitudes with regard to ourselves and the world shape our experiences of them. So if we can learn to acquire a skill that enables us to monitor what comes in and what goes out through the gateway of the mind, we then have a real chance to bring our deeper aspirations and values to bear upon our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. Greater control over the mind opens up a whole new way of being in the world and allows a genuine freedom to live our lives in accord with our deeper aspirations, unhindered by the instincts and impulses that can pull us in the contrary directions. For a spiritual aspirant, this is a freedom with real meaning.

I first came across some of these Kadam sayings when, as a twelve-year-old young monk in Dharamsala, India, I had the opportunity to attend a month-long teaching given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Tsongkhapa’s classic *Stages on the Path to Enlightenment*. It was a time when everyone, including the Dalai Lama himself, seemed to have plenty of time. Dharamsala, where His Holiness had established his residence in the early 1960s soon after his arrival in India as a refugee, was then a beautiful and quiet place. If my calculation is correct, this teaching took place in the spring of 1971. Needless to say, most of what His Holiness taught was way above the comprehension of a twelve-year-old boy, no matter how certain he might have been of his own intelligence. What struck me powerfully at this series of teaching was the depth of His Holiness’s reverence—

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one might even say deep affection—for the life and sayings of the Tibetan Kadam masters. The text the Dalai Lama was teaching on that occasion is well known for being filled with pithy spiritual sayings, especially those of the early Kadam masters. One day the Dalai Lama spoke about what the Kadam masters called the “four entrustments”:

Entrust your mind to Dharma practice;  
entrust your Dharma practice to a life of poverty;  
entrust your life of poverty to death;  
and entrust your death to an empty cave.<sup>5</sup>

To our modern sensibilities these are admittedly quite radical sentiments. Yet one cannot deny the note of clarity and decisiveness in these lines, especially in evocation of the powerful ideal of true nonattachment. We are being admonished not only to turn our mind to spirituality but to actually entrust the entire focus of our mind to spirituality if we are serious about seeking the highest spiritual goal. And when we do so, we are instructed to proceed with such dedication that the pursuit of material gain never enters our calculations. The third line, “entrust your life of poverty to death,” advises us that the pursuit of a spiritual path through a life of poverty should not be only a temporary means but a way of life to be embraced until our final end. When that end comes, we should not be concerned about what might happen to our body. Instead, we should have the attitude that “like the carcass of a dead animal, if our body ends up lying in a barren cave, so be it.”

As the Dalai Lama spoke of these sentiments, astonishingly (at least to the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy) His Holiness wept in front of the entire congregation of several hundred monks. He spoke of how the sentiments expressed in the principle of the four entrustments lay before us as spiritual aspirants. That sentiment is one of the highest ideals—a life truly dedicated to

meditative cultivation, with total freedom and transcendence. The Dalai Lama then expressed how lines such as these exerted a powerful pull on his heart and that the challenge for him was how to balance a life dedicated to meditative cultivation with service to others. Fourteen years later, in the autumn of 1985, I had the unexpected honor of being asked to translate at a teaching His Holiness conducted in the very same hall. Thus began my totally unimagined opportunity to serve the Dalai Lama and, through him, to serve the world—an honor that has continued for more than a quarter of a century now.

Since that spring of 1971, I have had numerous opportunities as a young monk to receive formal instructions on *lamrim* (stages of the path) and *lojong* (mind training)—the two trademark spiritual teachings of the Kadampas—from such senior Tibetan masters as the two tutors of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as well as from my own personal teacher, Kyabjé Zemé Rinpoché. The junior tutor to His Holiness, Kyabjé Trijang Rinpoché, was particularly adept at weaving his instructions with stories and bringing the pithy sayings of the Kadam masters to life, a feat that made listening to his teachings a real feast for the mind and heart. Like poignant lines from favorite poems that come to be part of one's memory, some of these sayings became over time part of my mental landscape and continue to resonate powerfully for me on a personal level.

### *Who Are the Kadam Masters?*

“Kadampa” refers to a wide range of Tibetan Buddhists who share a particular reverence for the person and teachings of the Indian master Atiśa and his Tibetan spiritual heir Dromtönpa.<sup>6</sup> Atiśa was an Indian Bengali teacher who came to Tibet in the summer of 1042 and lived in the Land of Snows for nearly thirteen years, never to return home to India. His arrival in Tibet was part of what Tibetan historians call the “second diffusion

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of Buddhism”—the beginnings of a large-scale revival of Buddhism in Tibet in the aftermath of its decline during the reign of Tibet’s last emperor, Langdarma, and the collapse of the central Tibetan kingdom in the tenth century. By the middle of the eleventh century, Tibet had splintered into several kingdoms, with descendants of the imperial family ruling over some of these kingdoms. The kingdom of Ngari in the west was one such domain, and its rulers were instrumental in bringing Atiśa to Tibet.

For Tibetans Atiśa’s arrival on their soil was an occasion for celebration, as it marked the culmination of years of sacrifice of both personal and material resources for the purpose of bringing an Indian master of his stature to Tibet. The Indian master was received on the Nepalese side of the border by a welcoming party of around three hundred horsemen from Tibet, recalling the Tibetan reception of the grand abbot Śāntarakṣita several centuries earlier.<sup>7</sup> Before he touched Tibetan soil, Atiśa must already have become familiar with the broad historical outline of Tibet’s relation to Buddhism—the role of the famous Indian Buddhist philosopher Śāntarakṣita, especially his introduction of the monastic order; the founding of the first monastery, Samyé, in central Tibet; and the efforts of early Tibetan translators to transmit classical Indian Buddhist texts to Tibet. Atiśa spent three years in the western Tibetan kingdom of Ngari. It appears that as part of the conditions for letting Atiśa go to Tibet, the Tibetan translator Naktso Lotsāwa had to give his word to the abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery that he would bring Atiśa back after three years. So, after the three years were over, despite entreaties from Tibetan disciples (especially from Dromtönpa) who were keen to bring Atiśa to central Tibet, Naktso insisted that they honor the solemn pledge he had given to the abbot and bring Atiśa back to India. Thus Atiśa and his entourage began the journey back home. Fortunately for Tibet, however, the way back through Nepal turned out to be unsafe

due to some regional war. This provided a legitimate excuse for Naktsö—Atiśa telling him, “There is no sin in failing a pledge that cannot be honored”—who then agreed with others that the master should go to central Tibet, the historically important region near Lhasa.

Once Master Atiśa headed for central Tibet, with the exception of a brief initial sojourn to visit his student Khutön, a wealthy and powerful lama, Dromtönpa took charge of the master’s itinerary. Thus began Atiśa’s second mission in Tibet. The master taught extensively, guided an entire generation of disciples committed to meditative cultivation, collaborated in projects of translating more classical Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan, and composed independent works on Buddhist thought and practice. On a personal level, Atiśa is said to have enjoyed his time in Tibet. He was so taken by the purity and the sweet taste of water on the Tibetan plateau that, it is widely believed, it was he who began the Tibetan custom of making daily offerings of water in bowls in front of altars. We also read in the master’s biographies that he extolled the virtues of the Tibetan custom of drinking tea. When I first read this I was especially intrigued, for drinking tea is so widespread today on the Indian plains where I grew up. Later I found out that it was only during the British colonial period that tea became part of Indian culture, which allowed me to appreciate Atiśa’s comments about tea drinking.

Master Atiśa’s contribution to Buddhism in Tibet was so deeply appreciated by his Tibetan followers that he came to be referred to by the epithet “the lord” (*jowo*) or “the sole lord” (*lhachik*). Over time the sacrifices and efforts made by the rulers of Ngari to bring Atiśa to Tibet also came to be mythologized, becoming part of an important narrative of the history of Buddhadharma in the Land of Snows. Just as the story of the Chinese monk Xuan Tsang’s travel to India in search of Buddhist scriptures was popularized in the legend entitled *Journey to the*

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*West*, the story of how the kings of Ngari made extensive sacrifices to bring Atiśa to Tibet were popularized in narratives and plays that are still performed to this day. Atiśa passed away in 1054 at his favorite retreat of Nyethang, nearly thirteen years after he first set foot on Tibetan soil.

Following Atiśa's death his Tibetan followers found a locus for their identification as members of a distinct community in Radreng Monastery, founded by Atiśa's spiritual heir Dromtönpa in 1056. These members came to describe themselves as the Kadampas, a designation composed of two words covering a wide semantic range—*ka* refers to sacred words or speech, and *dam* refers either to advice and instruction or to the verbs “to bind” and “to choose.”

A fifteenth-century history of the Kadam order offers four different explanations of the name.<sup>8</sup> First, *Kadam* may be defined as “those for whom the essence of the entire Buddhist scripture is integrated within the path of the three scopes—the spiritual aspirations of initial, intermediate, and advance capacities—and for whom all the scriptures of the Buddha appear as personal instructions.” A second interpretation of the meaning of *Kadam* suggests that the tradition is so called “because the Kadam founding father, Dromtönpa, chose, in accordance with the sacred instruction of Master Atiśa, the *sevenfold divinity and teaching* as his principal practice.” “Sevenfold” refers to the threefold teaching (the baskets of monastic discipline, discourses, and knowledge) and the four divinities (Buddha, Avaloliteśvara, Tārā, and Acala). A third interpretation is that when Master Atiśa was residing at Nyethang his disciples accorded great authority to his sacred words, so they came to be known as “Kadampas”—those who hold the sacred words as binding. The final interpretation is that the Kadampas are guided by the three baskets of scripture in their overall Dharma practice and approach Vajrayana teachings and practices circumspectly.

By the middle of the twelfth century, about a century after Master Atiśa's death, the spiritual descendants of the master and his heir Dromtönpa—the Kadampas—had spread far and wide. Many of the early teachers established monasteries and retreats in different parts of central and western Tibet. In summing up the influence of the Kadam tradition on Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, the authoritative *Blue Annals* states:

In general, during Master Atiśa's thirteen years in Tibet, a vast number received essential instructions from him and attained higher Dharma qualities. Their precise number cannot be calculated. In Tsang was the trio Gar, Gö, and Yöl, while in central Tibet was the trio Khu, Ngok, and Drom. These are masters of great fame. Here, however, I have given a broad account of the spiritual mentors whose lineage stems from Drom and whose names I have seen myself. Otherwise, according to their biographies, most of spiritual mentors who appeared in Tibet subsequently as well as the yogis who engaged in the life of an adept appeared to have studied at the feet of a Kadam spiritual mentor. Therefore Drom was someone whose enlightened activities were extensive and long lasting.<sup>9</sup>

### *Atiśa's Kadam Legacy*

Master Atiśa is perhaps revered most in Tibetan Buddhism for his genius in distilling the essence of the teachings of the Buddha into the framework of a single spiritual aspirant's path. His *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, which was composed, as its colophon states, at the explicit request of the Ngari ruler Jangchup Ö, organizes the entire corpus of the Buddhist teachings

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into what he calls practices relevant to “persons of three scopes” or “persons of three capacities”—initial, intermediate, and great. This revolutionary approach to understanding the heterogeneous literature of the Indian Buddhist sources enabled the Tibetans to appropriately contextualize and integrate the knowledge of these sources meaningfully within an individual’s meditative practice. Over time an entire genre of literature, collectively known as *stages of the path* or *lamrim*, evolved in Tibet on the basis of this seminal work by Atiśa. A key feature of the lamrim texts is their graduated approach to the path to enlightenment.

The second genre of literature that evolved in Tibet from Atiśa’s teachings is the cycle of *mind-training* or *lojong* texts, the most well known of which are Atiśa’s own *Bodhisattva’s Jewel Garland*, Langri Thangpa’s (1054–1123) *Eight Verses on Mind Training*, and the *Seven-Point Mind Training*, the latter being traditionally attributed to Chekawa (1101–75). The focal point of mind-training teachings is the cultivation of the *awakening mind* (*bodhicitta*), especially in the tradition of Śāntideva’s (eighth century) “equalizing and exchanging self and others.” This cultivation often employs the practice of *tonglen*, or “giving and receiving.” The heart of *tonglen* involves imaginatively “receiving” or taking upon oneself the suffering, unhappiness, and basic negative emotional and thought patterns of others, and “giving” or offering to others one’s own happiness, good fortune, and positive mental states. Unlike the stages of the path teachings, mind training emphasizes the use of pithy sayings and a direct approach when dealing with obstacles to the development of the awakening mind, the altruistic aspiration to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

Perhaps the most intriguing set of teachings that traces its origin to Master Atiśa is the collection enshrined in two large volumes known together as the *Book of Kadam*, selections of which are translated in the present volume. This cycle of texts relates

Atiśa's special relationship with Dromtönpa and highlights many of the more mystical aspects of Atiśa's legacy in Tibet, especially his veneration of Avalokiteśvara, the buddha of compassion, and his propitiation of goddess Tārā. Known as Atiśa and Dromtönpa's "secret teachings," this set of texts is centered on the choice of four meditation deities—(1) the Buddha as the teacher, (2) Avalokiteśvara as the deity of compassion, (3) Tārā as the goddess of enlightened action, and (4) Acala as the protector guardian—and the three scriptural baskets of discipline, knowledge, and meditation. This particular set of teachings is significant because of the ways in which it creates shifts in focus from the source teachings. For example, with respect to the teacher, the focus of importance shifts from Master Atiśa to Dromtönpa; with respect to land, it shifts from India as the land of Dharma to Tibet as a place of special significance connected with Avalokiteśvara; and with regard to spiritual instructions, although the Kadam period heralded the systematic scholastic study of the great Indian Buddhist classics, the focus shifts from classical Indian scriptures and treatises to the master's direct oral teachings, especially as revealed in mystic visionary states. There is a shift even in the style of language employed from classical composition to a more informal style, with greater use of vernacular Tibetan.

One intriguing issue in the history of the Kadam order is its disappearance. Although more research is needed to confirm this, it seems that by the end of sixteenth century, Kadam effectively ceased to be a distinct school. This may partly be due to the tremendous success of the custodians of Atiśa and Dromtönpa's teachings, on account of which all the key elements of the Kadam teachings were incorporated into the teachings of other Tibetan schools. It may also be partly the result of the rapid growth of Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419) Geluk school. Initially referred to as the Gandenpas after Ganden Monastery was founded by Tsongkhapa in 1409, Gelukpas were referred to also as the "new Kadampas."

*Conclusion*

The teachings of the Kadam masters have spiritually nourished the Tibetan people for nearly a millennium and have helped to shape our deeper aspirations. These teachings have helped to moisten the heart so that the seeds of compassion can sprout into beautiful shoots of altruistic awakening minds. They have helped to educate minds so that they see the world in a wiser, more enlightened manner. And finally, they have helped guide the spirit so that it continues to be moved by aspirations for the highest possible human perfection—namely the attainment of buddhahood for the benefit of all beings. It is wonderfully gratifying that through volumes such as this we are able to share with members of the larger world community this precious heritage of the Tibetan people, so that spiritual aspirants of all backgrounds may be able to drink from the stream of this spiritual nectar. Admittedly, many of the wise counsels of the Tibetan Kadam masters are framed within a language and culture specific to the Tibetan Buddhist world. Nonetheless, they also undeniably embody insights and knowledge that are universal and appeal to our fundamental nature as human beings aspiring for peace and happiness.

Of the various elements of the Kadam heritage, two stand out for me personally as continual sources of deep inspiration and spiritual nourishment. One is the teachings on *lojong* or mind training, and the other is the collection known as the “sayings of the Kadam masters.” What makes these two sets of teachings particularly attractive are their characteristic down-to-earthness, their succinctness, and their unwavering advocacy for cultivating other-regarding altruistic instincts.

I have had the honor of presenting the first of these two genres of Kadam teachings to a more general readership in a previous compilation entitled *Essential Mind Training*. The present volume, *Wisdom of the Kadam Masters*, is aimed at sharing the

second genre with a broader audience. The volume is divided into two parts. Part I presents the celebrated twelfth-century *Sayings of the Kadam Masters*, often referred to simply as the “Scattered Sayings.” It was compiled by Master Chegom to ensure that these sayings, originally dispersed among many people, were not lost and forgotten. Part II presents four chapters selected from the *Book of Kadam*: the first three from the Father Teachings (a series of dialogues between Master Atiśa and Dromtönpa in twenty-three chapters) and the final a sample chapter from the Son Teachings (a collection of stories of Dromtönpa’s previous lives as narrated by Master Atiśa). For more specific aspects of these two parts, see my introduction to part II. Translations of these classical Tibetan texts are all drawn from the much larger volume entitled *The Book of Kadam: The Core Texts*, which I had the honor to translate and publish as part of *The Library of Tibetan Classics*.

Although these Tibetan teachings emerged nearly a thousand years ago within a specific historical cultural context, like many of the world’s great spiritual teachings, the teachings of the Kadam masters embody insights and wisdom that resonate beyond the boundaries of time, culture, and language. This volume offers to modern-day Buddhists some of the most beloved teachings of the Tibetan tradition in an accessible format. For practitioners of other religious traditions, the texts collected in this special anthology will provide a glimpse into the rich world of Tibetan Buddhist teaching and practice and may offer insights and approaches that could be incorporated into the practices of one’s own cherished faith. To those readers who have no particular religious inclination, these teachings could be approached as a portion of the accumulated wisdom of humanity, representative of the long history of the human quest to better understand our existence and its meaning.