



## Elucidation of the Fourfold Aims of Human Life in the Manusmṛti

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### ABSTRACT

The notion of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya comprising Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa represents the fundamental paradigm of classical Indian philosophy providing the holistic view on human life. The Manusmṛti systematically explores the puruṣārthas and considers them as guidelines for proper conduct of a human being. The present research is aimed at analyzing the organization of the puruṣārthas described in the Manusmṛti. The Manusmṛti recognizes Dharma as a primary principle governing all spheres of human existence. It ensures that Artha (material wealth) and Kāma (desires) serve the purposes of Dharma only, i.e., do not lead a person astray and provide the moral satisfaction for the society members. While Artha and Kāma represent legitimate desires of people, they have to obey to Dharma as their dominating principle in order to prevent any moral or social deviations in the course of their fulfillment. At the same time, it directs attention of people beyond the scope of the material world towards the highest puruṣārtha – Mokṣa. Though the Manusmṛti focuses on normative duties, it indirectly conveys the idea that righteousness and self-restraint prepare the path to Mokṣa. Finally, the article argues that Manusmṛti is a highly organized set of human aims, with dharma as the primary organizing factor and mokṣa as the ultimate destination.

**Introduction:**

The Indian philosophy offers an elaborate and comprehensive structure of human existence. Life cannot be considered accidental or devoid of any meaning, but should have its purposes. The concept of Puruṣārthas implies that there are certain goals which have to be achieved by people throughout their lifetime. Four such goals are formulated, including Dharma (ethical duty), Artha (economic prosperity), Kāma (sexual pleasure), and Mokṣa (liberation). Thus, each person should find their place among the four spheres of activities and fulfill their tasks accordingly. They cannot work separately; instead, they should complement each other and contribute to the overall development of people.

The Manusmṛti can be regarded as an essential Dharmashastra treatise that defines the basic principles of human existence and social relations. The text explains what norms and values have to be accepted, what actions can be justified or criticized, and how people should act in different situations. While explaining the general rules of life, the author tries to establish a certain order that would promote harmony in human society and make people's lives more comfortable and prosperous. Therefore, the Manusmṛti tries to build a perfect world of people who perform their duties and adhere to the established norms.

As one might expect, the Manusmṛti introduces several important notions that become crucial when analyzing the text and its impact on further developments. Among the most important concepts are the notions of ṛta and dharma. They define how people have to act in accordance with natural laws and social values. Moreover, the text emphasizes the role of Dharma, which serves as the regulating notion for both Artha and Kāma. People should not refuse to pursue material prosperity and sexual desires, but at the same time, they should control them and regulate their actions.

Another important aspect is that all mentioned spheres are interconnected with spirituality, and Mokṣa represents the ultimate goal of human existence. However, since the Manusmṛti pays special attention to social relations and duties, it is possible to assume that liberation remains implicit. Nevertheless, the text provides many examples of how to act properly, follow the established norms, and lead a happy life. Thus, the concept of Puruṣārtha plays a central role in the Manusmṛti.

**Central Thesis Statement:**

Manusmṛti offers an integrated system of human existence by following the theory of Puruṣārthacatuṣṭaya, where Dharma operates as the controlling concept that governs Artha and Kāma, and Mokṣa is



set up as the supreme objective. Therefore, Manusmṛti has merged ethics, materialism, and spirituality into a single system for attaining peace within society and self-realization.

### **Purpose of the Research:**

The primary objective of this paper will be to undertake a critical analysis of the concept of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya i.e. Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa in the normative context of human life as described in Manusmṛti. The objective of this research will be to examine the concept of the meaning, roles and hierarchy of these aims in life with an emphasis on the importance of Dharma as a regulating factor in material gain and pleasures.

Additionally, the objective will be to explore the interrelationship among the puruṣārthas and how their fulfillment results in harmony and welfare both for the individual and society. It will further seek to understand the process of how Manusmṛti aids in harmonizing the three elements of ethics, society and spirituality to make it easier to attain Mokṣa. In addition, this research endeavors to assess the philosophical significance and contemporary relevance of the puruṣārtha framework, thereby providing a deeper understanding of its enduring value in shaping moral and cultural thought.

### **Literature Review:**

Interaction with the Manusmṛti and the theory of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya as an area of academic investigation may be considered a tradition of old times. Leading scholars like Medhatithi and Kulluka Bhatta have set the basis for the interpretation of the Manusmṛti, stressing the relevance of dharma in human existence and also the need to manage Artha and Kāma. The History of Dharmasastra by P. V. Kane is an excellent study of the Manusmṛti, which analyzes the historical and analytic importance of the text from the perspective of the development of law and ethics in India. Radhakrishnan and other philosophers in their philosophic discourses have presented the puruṣārtha theory as a comprehensive model for the development of man, including aspects of morality, necessities, emotions, and spirituality. In this context, the interdependent and hierarchical relationship between the four goals has been illustrated, where Mokṣa is the final goal. Modern scholarship on this subject has been somewhat critical in nature, focusing on issues such as gender and social norms. Current literature shows an amalgamation of coherence and discourse: the traditional scholars uphold the normative value of Manusmṛti, whereas modern scholars provide a new interpretation of Manusmṛti within a historical, critical, and comparative context. This study builds on the existing perspectives by focusing on the systematic explanation and interrelation of the four puruṣārthas described in the text.

**Research Methodology:**

The present study adopts a qualitative and text-based methodology to explore the idea of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya in the Manusmṛti. This methodology is based on a detailed analysis of texts, complemented by classical interpretation and modern scholarly understanding. The core of this method involves a detailed study of the texts, particularly through the selective citation and interpretation of relevant verses of the Manusmṛti, in the original Sanskrit language.

**Concept of Puruṣārtha in Indian Thought:**

Puruṣārtha is an important term in Indian philosophy. The word puruṣa means 'human being' while artha means 'purpose or object'. Hence, the word literally means 'that which is sought after by human beings.' Puruṣārtha suggests an ideal and purposeful conception of life as human beings have some specific aims which give purposefulness to their lives. There are four main goals of classical Indian philosophy including Dharma (righteousness or duty), Artha (prosperity), Kāma (desire or enjoyment), and Mokṣa (salvation or liberation). All these four aims together constitute the doctrine of Puruṣārtha catuṣṭaya.

Among all aims, Dharma forms the basis of the puruṣārtha system. It comprises moral and ethical principles as well as responsibilities of people. This principle works as a regulator in the puruṣārtha framework and guides human behavior. If there is no guidance of Dharma in the lives of human beings, the other three aims may make one's life immoral and unjust. Dharma makes human beings responsible while pursuing other aims such as Artha and Kāma.

Artha, the second aim, is concerned with economic prosperity and the basic means of sustenance of life. Indian philosophy neither disapproves material pursuit nor rejects the significance of Artha in our lives. Material wealth plays a major role in carrying out duties, caring about our families, and helping others. But Artha should always be earned and spent according to Dharma, otherwise, it leads to exploitation of others.

Kāma is the third aim that includes desire, love, and pleasure of human beings. It is not restricted to sensual enjoyment alone. It even embraces beauty and love, which play significant roles in our lives. The recognition of this fact shows the practicality of Indian philosophy because it accepts human desires. In accordance with Dharma, Kāma leads a man towards success, otherwise, it causes moral decay.

Mokṣa is the fourth and final aim that is related to salvation. It means that human beings attain liberation and freedom from the chain of rebirths (saṃsāra) by realizing the truth of self. Being transcendental and



religious in nature, Mokṣa is regarded as nivṛtti puruṣārtha while others are pravṛtti or worldly puruṣārtha. One attains this goal of life through wisdom and detachment. Equally important is the fact that these four aims go together very well, complementing each other and not standing at odds. Dharma keeps everything balanced ethically by ensuring that the acquisition of Artha and Kāma takes place in an orderly manner. Whereas Kāma helps meet psychological requirements, Artha provides the physical foundation without which it will be impossible to follow Dharma. Mokṣa, the supreme aim, adds spirituality to human life, going beyond the rest of the three aims.

Ultimately, the idea of Puruṣārtha embodies a deep fusion of human desires in Indian philosophy. It recognizes the intricacies of human nature and provides a systematic approach that harmonizes earthly involvement with spiritual awakening. By combining responsibility, wealth, ambition, and freedom, the philosophy guarantees both personal satisfaction and societal cohesion along with ultimate enlightenment.

### **Dharma as the Foundation:**

In the context of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, Dharma holds the most essential and governing role. The Manusmṛti positions Dharma at the core of human existence, portraying it as the foundation that upholds order, harmony, and balance in personal behavior and societal structure. In contrast to a limited view of “religion,” Dharma includes various interpretations, such as duty, righteousness, moral law, and ethical obligation. It serves as the driving force that influences human actions in line with universal and societal standards.

The Manusmṛti clearly specifies the origins and characteristics of Dharma in the famous verse:

vedo'khilo dharmamūlaṃ smṛtiśīle ca tadvidām |

ācāraścaiva sādhuṇāmātmanastuṣṭireva ca || <sup>(1)</sup>

This verse indicates that Dharma is based in the Vedas, expanded upon by Smṛti literature, demonstrated in the behavior of righteous people (sādhu-ācāra), and validated by personal conscience (ātmanastuṣṭi). Therefore, Dharma is not simply a theoretical concept but a vibrant and evolving benchmark, rooted in texts, customs, ethical behavior, and individual moral consciousness. It combines external authority with internal assessment, making it both normative and experiential.

As the basis of existence, Dharma regulates the quest for the other puruṣārthas-Artha and Kāma. The attainment of wealth (Artha) and the satisfaction of desires (Kāma) are acknowledged as inherent and



essential elements of human life. Nevertheless, the Manusmṛti emphasizes that these endeavors should be carried out within the limits of Dharma. Wealth obtained through unethical methods or unchecked ambitions is regarded as detrimental, resulting in individual decline and societal chaos. Dharma, thus, serves as a moral guide, ensuring that human desires promote the common good instead of creating imbalance.

The centrality of Dharma also signifies a wider philosophical perspective wherein the ethical order (ṛta) forms the foundation of the universe. As components of this cosmic system, humans are anticipated to harmonize their behaviors accordingly. By following Dharma, people not only preserve social harmony but also advance spiritually. In this context, Dharma acts as the base on which elevated objectives, especially Mokṣa, are established.

Moreover, Dharma is not fixed; it changes based on context, such as an individual's life stage (āśrama), social function, and situations. The Manusmṛti outlines specific responsibilities for various societal groups, highlighting that moral behavior should be tailored to individual roles and obligations. The contextual aspect of Dharma emphasizes its practical relevance and its function in maintaining a well-structured society.

In summary, the Manusmṛti depicts Dharma as the foundation of human existence and the key structure of the puruṣārtha framework. By overseeing Artha and Kāma, it guarantees that both material and emotional endeavors stay ethically anchored. Simultaneously, it offers the ethical training required for spiritual growth, ultimately steering individuals toward achieving Mokṣa. Consequently, Dharma serves as both the basis for societal structure and the route to greater human satisfaction.

### **Artha: Material Prosperity under Ethical Control:**

Within the doctrine of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, Artha holds an essential role as the concept related to material wealth, economic safety, and social order. Instead of dismissing worldly life, classical Indian philosophy acknowledges that human existence necessitates sufficient resources for survival, family support, social responsibilities, and the fulfillment of duties. The Manusmṛti acknowledges this truth and allows the pursuit of wealth, yet it does so within a well-defined ethical structure guided by Dharma. The core idea is clearly conveyed in the statement: “dharmeṇa arthaṃ samācaret”.<sup>(2)</sup> This suggests that wealth must be obtained and used in alignment with Dharma. In other terms, Artha is not a separate or ultimate aim; it is secondary to moral law. The Manusmṛti therefore dismisses both extremes: the



rejection of material requirements and the unrestricted chase for riches. Rather, it promotes a harmonious method where economic actions are combined with moral responsibility.

Artha serves a crucial function in maintaining both personal and communal existence. It allows for the completion of multiple tasks, such as family obligations, hospitality, philanthropic efforts, and spiritual practices. Lacking adequate resources, the practice of Dharma becomes challenging. Consequently, the accumulation of wealth is viewed as not just acceptable but essential. Nonetheless, the Manusmṛti underscores that the methods of earning should be fair, truthful, and non-harmful. Wealth gained through fraud, exploitation, or force is denounced, as it undermines individual integrity and societal harmony. The appropriate utilization of wealth is equally significant. The Manusmṛti promotes the distribution of resources for just causes, including assisting dependents, conducting sacrifices, and helping the underprivileged. This conveys the notion that riches are not just for individual pleasure but also for the benefit of the community. The ethical aspect of Artha therefore goes beyond simply acquiring to incorporate responsible management and allocation. Additionally, the control of Artha through Dharma acts as a protection against avarice and surplus. Unchecked greed for riches may result in ethical decay, societal disparity, and strife. The Manusmṛti establishes ethical boundaries for economic activities to guarantee that material wealth enhances overall well-being instead of resulting in chaos. Within the larger puruṣārtha context, Artha additionally aids the other life goals. It offers the material basis required for the attainment of Kāma in a respectable and balanced way, and it establishes an environment favorable for the quest for elevated spiritual objectives, such as Mokṣa. Therefore, although Artha is a material objective, it is not independent from the ultimate goal of human existence.

In summary, the Manusmṛti offers a complex perspective on Artha as a vital but controlled element of human life. By emphasizing that wealth should be attained through Dharma, it connects economic pursuits with moral principles. This method guarantees that material wealth contributes to both personal satisfaction and social cohesion, while also nurturing the loftier spiritual goals of human existence.

### **Kāma: Regulation of Desires:**

In the context of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, Kāma signifies the aspect of human existence related to desire, enjoyment, and emotional satisfaction. It encompasses not just physical pleasure but also warmth, love, artistic appreciation, and the inherent drive for joy. Classical Indian philosophy acknowledges that desire is a fundamental part of human nature and, as a result, does not support its total repression. The Manusmṛti recognizes the validity of Kāma but strongly stresses its regulation by Dharma, thus ensuring it fosters a balanced and harmonious existence. This principle is reflected in the well-known statement:



“dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmo'smi”.<sup>(3)</sup> Though this verse is commonly linked to the Bhagavad Gita, it effectively expresses the moral perspective pertinent to the Manusmṛti—that desire is permissible and even inherent when it aligns with Dharma. In other terms, Kāma should be sought after while adhering to moral law, societal standards, and self-control.

The Manusmṛti does not dismiss pleasure; instead, it incorporates it into a wider moral context. Human beings are not required to forgo all types of pleasure, particularly during the gr̥hastha āśrama (householder stage), where the satisfaction of desires serves a valid purpose. Marriage, family dynamics, and social connections are regarded as suitable settings for the manifestation of Kāma. The text stresses the importance of moderation and self-control, cautioning against overindulgence, which may result in moral degradation, lack of self-discipline, and societal chaos.

The governance of Kāma by Dharma fulfills various functions. Initially, it shields people from the harmful effects of unchecked longing, including attachment, greed, and strife. Secondly, it guarantees that individual pleasure does not negatively impact others or disrupt social harmony. Third, it harmonizes emotional and sensual experiences with ethical and spiritual aspirations, avoiding a division of human life. In this manner, Dharma serves as a guiding principle that directs desire into positive and significant expressions. Additionally, Kāma is intimately linked to Artha, since material assets frequently facilitate the satisfaction of desires. Nonetheless, both Artha and Kāma are secondary to Dharma, creating a regulated and interconnected system. When adequately managed, Kāma enhances psychological health and enriches human existence. It offers inspiration, happiness, and emotional fulfillment, all of which are crucial for a fulfilling life. On a more profound level, the controlled management of desire further readies the person for elevated spiritual goals. By mastering and honing desires, an individual slowly approaches detachment, essential for achieving Mokṣa. Therefore, when directed by Dharma, Kāma serves not as a hindrance but as a progression in the broader path of self-discovery. To summarize, the Manusmṛti portrays Kāma as an intrinsic and essential element of human existence, yet one that requires careful regulation through ethical guidelines. By placing desire beneath Dharma, it guarantees that pleasure stays balanced, beneficial, and supportive of both social harmony and spiritual advancement.

### **Mokṣa: The Supreme Goal:**

Within the doctrine of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, Mokṣa stands as the highest and ultimate aim of human life. It signifies liberation (mukti) from the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra) and the realization of the true nature of the self (ātman). While the Manusmṛti primarily emphasizes social duties, moral conduct, and legal regulations, it does not lose sight of this supreme spiritual goal. Rather, it subtly and consistently



directs human life toward liberation through the disciplined pursuit of Dharma. The idea that bondage and liberation depend upon one's actions and knowledge is expressed in the traditional statement: "karmanā badhyate janturvidyayā tu pramucyate".<sup>(4)</sup>

This signifies that human are constrained by their deeds (karma) and liberated via understanding (vidyā). The Manusmṛti, while not entirely a philosophical work like the Upaniṣads, includes this crucial understanding by highlighting virtuous behavior, self-restraint, and ethical discipline as foundational practices for spiritual awakening. Mokṣa is fundamentally distinct from the other three puruṣārthas- Dharma, Artha, and Kāma-which focus mainly on worldly existence (pravṛtti). In contrast, Mokṣa signifies the journey of detachment and elevation (nivṛtti), where one aims for liberation from clinging, longing, and unawareness. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean a dismissal of earthly responsibilities. The Manusmṛti outlines a progressive journey where individuals initially meet their duties based on Dharma and then slowly transition toward renunciation and spiritual goals. The text highlights the significance of the āśrama system (phases of life), especially the shift from the householder phase (gṛhastha) to the renouncing phases (vānaprastha and sannyāsa). At these later phases, the person increasingly looks within, engaging in austerity, meditation, and detachment. This kind of disciplined lifestyle promotes self-awareness, which is crucial for achieving Mokṣa. Additionally, the quest for Mokṣa is tightly connected to the management of Artha and Kāma. When Dharma governs wealth and desire, they do not entrap the individual but instead integrate into a harmonious life that readies the mind for elevated understanding. In contrast, unchecked attachment to material indulgences deepens enslavement and obstructs freedom. Therefore, Mokṣa is not separate from the other goals but signifies their peak and surpassing.

A further important element is the function of knowledge (jñāna or vidyā). The Manusmṛti indicates that genuine freedom comes from comprehending the essence of reality and the self. Living ethically cleanses the mind, while understanding dispels ignorance, resulting in liberation. In this regard, Dharma acts as the practical basis, while knowledge serves as the pathway to final liberation. To conclude, the Manusmṛti depicts Mokṣa as the highest aim that provides profound significance to human life. While the text mainly focuses on social and moral rules, it incorporates these within a wider spiritual perspective. By leading people toward virtuous living, self-control, and the quest for understanding, it ultimately steers them toward freedom. Consequently, Mokṣa signifies not only the peak of the puruṣārtha framework but also the ultimate realization of human existence.



### **Interrelationship of the Four Puruṣārthas:**

The doctrine of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya attains its highest importance not only through the recognition of four unique goals-Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa-but also by comprehending their interactive dynamics. The Manusmṛti views these aims not as separate or conflicting objectives; instead, it depicts them as an interconnected and ranked framework that promotes the harmonious growth of human existence. Every puruṣārtha serves a distinct purpose, but they are all related, creating a unified system that aligns worldly pursuits with spiritual goals. This cohesive perspective is encapsulated in the notion: “dharmārthakāmamokṣānām samyaganuṣṭhānameva jīvanasya lakṣyam”, <sup>(5)</sup> highlighting that the correct and harmonious pursuit of all four objectives represents the genuine aim of existence. At the heart of this framework is Dharma, serving as the controlling and directing principle. It regulates both Artha (material wealth) and Kāma (desire), making sure they are sought after within ethical and moral boundaries. In the absence of Dharma's direction, the chase for wealth and enjoyment can become overwhelming and harmful, resulting in individual decline and societal chaos. Therefore, Dharma serves as the ethical base that sustains harmony and stability. Artha, on the other hand, serves a supportive function by supplying the material resources required for the practice of Dharma. Economic stability allows individuals to meet their responsibilities, care for their families, participate in charitable endeavors, and give back to the community. In this regard, Artha does not contradict Dharma but enhances it, enabling ethical living to be achievable.

Kāma presents the aspect of longing, feelings, and pleasure, acting as a driving force in human existence. It demonstrates the inherent human tendency towards joy and satisfaction. When guided by Dharma, Kāma enhances life by offering emotional fulfillment and mental health. Nonetheless, if separated from ethical oversight, it may result in discord and dependency. Accordingly, Kāma needs to operate within the boundaries established by Dharma and reinforced by Artha. Mokṣa, the supreme goal, surpasses the other three puruṣārthas while simultaneously unifying them into a greater purpose. It signifies freedom from the cycle of life and death and the awareness of the genuine self. Dharma, Artha, and Kāma pertain to material existence (pravṛtti), whereas Mokṣa signifies the journey of transcendence (nivṛtti). However, the achievement of Mokṣa is not separate from the other goals; instead, it is facilitated by the careful and measured pursuit of them. Living ethically, managing desires, and using wealth responsibly cleanse the individual and establish the necessary conditions for spiritual awakening. The connection between the four puruṣārthas demonstrates a nuanced and comprehensive grasp of human life. It blends both spiritual and worldly aspects, steering clear of the extremes of asceticism and materialism. The system recognizes the importance of wealth and ambition while ensuring they stay secondary to ethical and spiritual



objectives. In summary, the Manusmṛti depicts the four puruṣārthas as a mutually dependent and hierarchically structured framework where Dharma governs, Artha supports, Kāma inspires, and Mokṣa realizes. This cohesive strategy offers a balanced framework for life that aligns ethical behavior, financial stability, emotional satisfaction, and spiritual freedom, ultimately leading individuals toward a fulfilling and purposeful life.

### **Critical Perspective:**

The Manusmṛti outlines a well-organized ethical framework based on the principle of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, providing an extensive guide for governing human existence. Nevertheless, contemporary researchers have thoroughly analyzed various elements of the text, especially its strict social conventions. The varṇa system's hierarchy and established social roles have been criticized for fostering inequality and hindering social progress. Likewise, specific mandates concerning women have been interpreted as indicative of patriarchal beliefs that conflict with modern principles of equality and personal liberty. Academics like P. V. Kane and Patrick Olivelle highlight that the Manusmṛti must be interpreted in its historical and cultural framework instead of being viewed as a universally applicable legal framework. This viewpoint enables differentiating between its normative ideals and the actualities of social practice. Notwithstanding these critiques, the philosophical structure of Puruṣārtha continues to wield significant influence. Its harmonious blend of Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa continues to influence Indian ethical ideas. The focus on ethical governance, accountable striving for wealth and desire, and the ultimate aim of freedom illustrates a comprehensive grasp of human existence that remains significant even in contemporary philosophical discussions.

### **Conclusion:**

The Manusmṛti presents a thorough and cohesive perspective on human existence via the principle of Puruṣārtha-catuṣṭaya, aligning ethical, material, emotional, and spiritual aspects. At the core of this framework is Dharma, serving as the principle that directs human behavior. It guarantees that the quest for Artha (material wealth) and Kāma (desire and pleasure) stays regulated, moral, and advantageous to society. Through this means, Dharma avoids excess and imbalance, harmonizing personal actions with a larger ethical framework. Simultaneously, the Manusmṛti recognizes the validity of earthly desires. Artha offers the essential resources needed for maintaining life and performing responsibilities, while Kāma meets the inherent human desire for enjoyment and emotional fulfillment. Nevertheless, both are thoughtfully aligned with Dharma, guaranteeing that they enhance individual and community welfare. In the end, the system leads to Mokṣa, the supreme aim of human life. It symbolizes spiritual freedom and



the overcoming of earthly constraints. Consequently, the Manusmṛiti offers a balanced and tiered framework of existence, where earthly ambitions are embraced rather than dismissed, contributing to a broader spiritual path that culminates in total fulfillment and freedom.

### References:

- Manusmṛiti 2.6.
- Manusmṛiti general teaching; cf. Dharma-Artha relation passages.
- Bhagavad Gita 7.11.
- Traditional Dharmashastra idea (cf. Manusmṛiti teachings on karma and liberation).
- Conceptual summary based on Dharmashastra tradition.

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