

Who Is 'God' ?¹

Today, let us explore some of Zarathushtra's ideas about the Divine, because how we perceive the Divine affects how we treat each other, other living things, and our environment. I have been asked: Where in the Gathas does it say that we have to take care of the environment? Well, at the end of this session, I will show you, in Zarathushtra's own words.

His perception of the nature of the Divine, differs in material ways from the religions of his culture, as well as from some of the dominant religions of today, which did not exist when Zarathushtra was alive. Yet, certain Avestan words in the Gathas have been translated ~ interpretively and inconsistently ~ in ways that show Wisdom to be a 'God' of anger, wrath, who inflicts punishments for wrongdoing, on fallible mortals.² These interpretive translations are contrary to some of Zarathushtra's own words, as we will see.

Let's start with the deities of his culture, because that is the mind-set into which he was born. These deities were like human beings, but on a more powerful scale, with all the good and bad qualities of humans ~ a bit like the ancient deities of other Indo-European cultures. But in Zarathushtra's society, the priests portrayed these deities as inflicting cruelty, violence, tyranny, bondage, to ensure obedience.

Describing these priests, he says, "... the rich Karpan [a type of priest] chose the rule of tyrants and deceit rather than truth." Gathas Yasna 32, verse 12, Insler translation 1975.

Describing these deities, he says, "The gods did not at all choose correctly ... Since they chose the worst thought [*achista- manah-*], they then rushed into fury [*aeshema-*], with which they have afflicted the world and mankind." Gathas, Yasna 30 verse 6, Insler translation 1975. So here, he associates *fury, anger*, with the *wrong choice* ~ the *worst thought* ~ which causes suffering in the world. How then can we adopt translation choices that turn Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine into a deity of fury, anger? This is just one of many examples.³ Even later texts show 'Anger' (*Aeshma*) as the name of a high ranking demon. Does it make sense that Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine would include a quality personified by a demon? True, there are no devils or demons in the Gathas.⁴ But the names of demons in the later texts were all vices, and in this instance, these texts accurately reflect Zarathushtra's thought that anger, rage, fury, is the wrong choice, the worst thought, and generates suffering.

He describes the suffering caused by the religions of his society in the famous allegorical lament, "... the cruelty of fury and violence, of bondage and might, holds me in captivity ..." Gathas, Yasna 29, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

This troubled Zarathushtra deeply.

He openly spoke out against such practices, and as a result, he was persecuted, ostracized. He says, "To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan ..." Gathas, Yasna 46, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

"Yes, throughout my lifetime I have been condemned as the greatest defiler, I who try to satisfy the poorly protected (creatures) with truth, [*mazda* 'Wisdom']..." Gathas, Yasna 49, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

Zarathushtra did not "reform" the religions of his culture. He rejected them.

He concluded that deceit, tyranny, greed, cruelty, bondage, rage, violence, destruction, etc. were 'wrong', and that deities who personified such wrongful qualities were not worthy of worship. Nor did he adopt a double standard - that it is wrong for people to act in such ways, but O.K. if 'God' does so.

Re-thinking the Divine.

In re-thinking the *nature* of the Divine, Zarathushtra came to a totally new envisionment (*daena-*) from that of his culture - one in which, to be worthy of worship, to be Divine, a Being had to be wholly, completely, good - not a mix of good and bad qualities. This new understanding of the Divine was so foundational, that it was still remembered, even after destructive wars of conquest, more than 1,000 years later, in the Pahlavi texts of Mardan Farrukh, and Zadsparam. In fact, Zadsparam, a Pahlavi High Priest, wrote that the first requirement for bringing about the renovation of existence is the understanding that the Divine is wholly good, with no taint of wrongdoing in Him.

But this new perception of the Divine requires a revolutionary conclusion - that it is not *who* a being is that makes It Divine (witness Zarathushtra's rejection of the deities of his culture). It is *what* a being is, - the *quality* of the being, the *nature* of the being - that makes it Divine, worthy of worship.

So, how *does* Zarathushtra describe the qualities that make a being Divine? With simplicity: with 7 inter-related qualities, each of which is completely good, wholly beneficial. These 7 qualities were later called 'amesha spenta' - a term which does not appear in the Gathas, but which I use for short.

But these 7 qualities, in addition to comprising the nature of the Divine, also permeate every aspect of Zarathushtra's envisionment. So unless we understand their meanings, we cannot fully appreciate his teachings.

Unfortunately, Avestan became an unknown language for more than a 1,000 years. And, giving credit where due, it was well intentioned professional linguists in western universities,

who began the process of decoding Avestan about 150 or more years ago. Even today, it has not been completely decoded. And there is much disagreement about the meanings of these 7 qualities. But we can resolve these problems based on how Zarathushtra uses these words in the Gathas. Here I will give you just a summary, with a few highlights. Let's start, as Zarathushtra does, with:

A **beneficial way of being** (*spenta- mainyu-*).⁵

mainyu- has been translated as 'spirit' or 'mentality'. But in the Gathas, *mainyu-* includes **word** and **action**.

Zarathushtra says, "Yes, there are two fundamental [*mainyu-*], twins which are renowned to be in conflict. **In thought and in word, in action, they are two: ...**" Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 3, Insler translation 1975.

So if *mainyu-* includes **word** and **action**, its meaning cannot be only 'spirit', or only 'mentality'; *mainyu-* would have to mean the full totality of a 'way of being' ~ comprising thought, word and action. And the translation 'way of being' fits every use of *mainyu-* in the Gathas.

spenta- has been translated as 'holy', 'incremental', 'progressive', 'prosperous', etc. I follow Thieme, (Insler's teacher) in translating *spenta-* as 'beneficial'. It fits all of the ways in which Zarathushtra uses *spenta-* in the Gathas, (whereas, with respect, other translation choices do not). For example:

Referring to the Divine, Zarathushtra says "... He is [*spenta-*] to the needy ..." Gathas, Yasna 29, verse 7, Insler translation 1975.

As you can see, 'he is **holy** to the needy, or **incremental** to the needy, or **progressive** to the needy, or **prosperous** to the needy, do not fit. But "... He is **beneficial to the needy** ..." fits.

In one of the Gathas, addressing the Divine, Zarathushtra says ~ 6 times, as though he really wants us to get it,

"But, I have already realized Thee to be [*spenta-* 'beneficial'], ..." Gathas, Yasna 43 verse 5, verse 7, verse 9, verse 11, verse 13, and verse 15, Insler translation 1975.

So the nature of the Divine *is* the 'beneficial way of being (*spenta- mainyu-*). That is why in the Gathas, and later texts, *spenta- mainyu-* and Wisdom are equated.

But the cosmic dualism of the later texts ~ 2 uncreated 'gods', one all good and one all evil ~ is contrary to the evidence of the Gathas.⁶ I will show you that evidence in a future session.

Now a 'beneficial way of being (*spenta- mainyu-*) is equated with the next quality of the Divine, which has been translated variously as,

Truth, righteousness, and order (*asha-*).⁷ In English, these are 3 different meanings. But, based on the Indo-Iranian origins of the word, in Avestan, these differences are reconciled. *Asha-* means an order of existence that is 'truth' in the sense of what is 'correct'. So *asha-* means factual 'truths', as well as the 'truths' of mind/heart/spirit (all that is right), which in the Gathas includes such qualities as honesty, generosity, lovingkindness, friendship, solicitude, caring, compassion, being just, and above all, intrinsic goodness in the superlative degree ~ *vahishta-*.⁸ In fact in later Avestan texts, *asha- vahishta-* became a standard term (Pahlavi *ardibehesht*).

There is no word in English that captures the full meaning of *asha-*. The English word 'correct' falls far short, and carries a lot of extraneous cultural baggage. The word 'truth' is the closest one-word equivalent. But a more accurate definition ~ one that fits both the linguistic origins of *asha-*, as well as all of the ways in which it is used in the Gathas ~ is the 'true (correct, wholly good) order of existence', ~ a state of being which the Divine personifies ~ and its meaning includes every quality that is true, good, right. The next quality of the Divine is,

Good thinking (*vohu- manah-*), which in the Gathas is used as the comprehension of truth (*asha-*). And what is the complete comprehension of truth? It is Wisdom personified. A state of enlightenment. In fact, in the Gathas, 'Wisdom' (*mazda-*) is the name used most often for the Divine.⁹

Inslar has explained, that the Avestan word *manah-* is used for 'mind' (the faculty), 'thinking' (its process), and 'thought' (object). Now, in English, these words generally mean intellectual functions. And this has led to the mistaken conclusion that lovingkindness and other good emotions are absent from Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine. But there is abundant evidence that he uses *manah-* to include both intellectual and non-intellectual qualities such as emotions, creativity, insight. In fact, we have already seen, that he equates the worst thought [*achista- manah-*] with *fury* which is an emotion. And since good thinking is the comprehension of truth, it would have to include all the good qualities that are implicit in the notion of *asha-* ~ which includes good emotions such as lovingkindness, compassion, caring, etc.

In short, in the Gathas, *vohu- manah-* 'good mind, good thinking, good thought' is used in ways that include the full spectrum of conscious capabilities committed to goodness ~ intellectual, emotional, creative, insightful etc.

The next quality of the Divine is *spenta- aramaiti-*. Linguists disagree greatly regarding its meaning. *Aramaiti-* has been translated as,

right-mindedness, divine wisdom, satisfying intention, piety or respect, faith and devotion, fittingness, submission and humility, and serenity, stability and tranquility. As Thieme (Insler's teacher) has pointed out, many of these translations have no relevance to the Divine. So let's look at how Zarathushtra uses *aramaiti-*. Here are a few examples.

Referring to the Divine, he says "But to this world He came with the rule (*xshathra-*) of good thinking (*vohu- manah-*) and of truth (*asha-*), and ... enduring [*aramaiti-*] gave **body and breath** (to it)..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 7, Insler translation 1975.

How does *aramaiti-* give '**body and breath**' to the rule of truth and good thinking? It can only do so by giving life to truth ~ personifying truth, embodying truth, its comprehension, its rule, in thought, word and action ~ giving substance to it.

And indeed, Zarathushtra specifically says so "...Through **its actions**, [*aramaiti-*] gives substance to the truth..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 6, Insler translation 1975.

In fact, the only definition of *spenta- aramaiti-* that fits all of the ways it is used in the Gathas is 'beneficial thoughts, words and actions that embody truth', or for short, 'beneficial embodied truth'.

Of course, the Divine has its own thoughts, words and actions ~ It is not limited to mortal ones. Which brings us to the next Divine quality 'good rule' (*vohu- xshathra-*).

This Divine quality 'good rule', first, is how the Divine rules Itself ~ that Wisdom is Lord (*ahura-*) over the qualities that make a being Divine. This is an idea that we have long forgotten under the influence of other religious paradigms, even though in the Gathas, Zarathushtra repeats this idea more than once. I touched on this idea in the last session, but it is even more relevant here, so forgive me for repeating these quotations.

Speaking of the Divine, Zarathushtra says,

"... for the very Wise Master [*ahura-* 'lord'] of good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 1, Insler translation 1975. The word which Insler has translated as **Master** is *ahura-* 'lord'.

"... Lord [*ahura-*] of the word and deed stemming from [*vohu- mainyu-* '(a) good way of being'] ..." Gathas, Yasna 45, verse 8, Insler translation 1975;

"... Thou art the Lord [*ahura-*] by reason of Thy tongue (which is) in harmony with truth, and by reason of Thy words stemming from good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 3; Insler translation 1975;

"... [*mazda-* 'Wisdom'] in rule [*xshathra-*] is Lord [*ahura-*] through [*aramaiti-* 'thoughts, words and actions that embody truth']." Gathas, Yasna 47, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

But Divine Rule goes a step further.

It is not just self-oriented ~ governing Itself in perfection.

Divine rule is actively involved in helping, supporting, nurturing, benefiting, the rest of existence in its spiritual evolution to the true (wholly good) order of existence. This idea is expressed in many ways. Here is just one in which Zarathushtra, uses rhetorical questions, to show us what is included in the notion of Wisdom's good rule.

"Where shall there be protection instead of injury?

Where shall [merezhdika- 'compassion'] take place?

Where truth [asha-] which attains glory?

Where [spenta- aramaiti- 'beneficial thoughts, words and actions that embody truth']?

Where [vahishta- manah- '(the) most good thinking']?

Where [mazda- 'Wisdom'], through Thy rule [xshathra-]?" Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 4, Insler translation 1975; (the words in black font are my translation choices).

We tend to think of a Ruler as someone who controls people. But 'good rule' (*vohu-xshathra-*) is not about that kind of control or domination. In the Gathas, the relationship between the Divine and mortals is not authoritarian. It is not described as that of a master to a slave or servant, nor even a father to a child, but as a **friend to a friend**, an **ally (or partner)**. There are many verses which express these ideas. Here are a just a few,

"...Someone like Thee, [mazda- 'Wisdom'], should declare to me, His **friend**, ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 1, Insler translation 1975;

"...I lament to Thee. Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a **friend** should grant to a **friend**..." Gathas, Yasna 46, verse 2, Insler translation 1975;

"...the loving man ... [spenta- 'beneficial'] through truth [asha- 'through the true order of existence], watching over the heritage for all, is a world-healer [ahum.bish '(an) existence-healer'] and Thy **ally** [urvatha-] ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 2, Insler translation 1975.

In this last quotation (did you notice?), Wisdom's **ally** ~ **the loving man** ~ is not just a healer of Zoroastrians, but a healer of existence.

The 6th quality of the Divine is,

Completeness (*haurvatat-*), a state of being that personifies **truth**, **its comprehension**, **its embodiment**, **its rule**, completely, wholly, with no bad qualities in it.

And the 7th quality of the Divine is,

Non-deathness (*ameretat-*), a state of being that is not bound by mortality.

This perception of the Divine was so different from the deities of Zarathushtra's culture, that ~ perhaps to help his followers remember ~ he often addresses Wisdom and truth, or Wisdom, truth and its comprehension good thinking, together, as the object of his worship. And indeed, he worships truth, indicating that the personification of this quality is what makes a being Divine, worthy of worship.¹⁰ For example,

"... As long as I shall be able, I shall respect that truth [*asha-*] is to have a gift of reverence [*nemah-*]." Y43.9, Insler translation 1975. The Avestan word which Insler has translated as "reverence" has been translated by other linguists as "homage". So *nemah-* is part of the Avestan vocabulary of worship.

"Therefore, let us reverently give an offering [*myazdem*] to Thee, Lord, and to truth [*asha-*]..." Y34.3, Insler translation 1975. The Avestan word *myazdem* is an offering of worship.

"... Thou, [*mazda-* 'Wisdom'], together with truth [*asha-*] and good thinking [*vohu- manah-*] ... Let bright gifts and reverence (for all of you) be manifest amid us."
Gathas, Yasna 33, verse 7, Insler translation 1975.

Now, if we look at a list of these 7 divine qualities ~ without all the explanations ~ certain things jump out at us. Take a look, and see what jumps out at you.

The nature of the Divine is:

1. The beneficial way of being (*spenta- mainyu-*), which is,
2. The true (correct, wholly good) order of existence (*asha- vahishta-*),
3. Its comprehension, good thinking (*vohu- manah-*),
4. Its beneficial embodiment in thought, word, and action (*spenta- aramaiti-*),
5. Its good rule, (*vohu- xshathra-*),
6. Its complete attainment (*haurvatat-*), and
7. Non-deathness (*ameretat-*), a state of being not bound by mortality.

A Being who is Lord (*ahura-*), of these 7 qualities.

One who personifies Wisdom (*mazda-*). An enlightened state of being.

As Thieme has pointed out, in a religion such as Zarathushtra's which has no images of the Divine, the name given to the Divine is a way of revealing Its nature. Thieme's opinion is abundantly corroborated in the Younger Avestan *Hormezd Yasht* as well as in the much later prayer of the '101 Names' (of the Divine).

Now, take a look at the first 5 of these 7 Divine qualities ~ a beneficial way of being, the true (correct, good) order of existence, its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule.

It is apparent (is it not?) that these 5 qualities also exist in mortals. And in fact, Zarathushtra specifically says so.

He speaks of,

"...The truthful person [*ashavan-*] ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 4;

"... [*ashavan-*] ..." Yasna 31, verse 17;

"... [*ashavan-*] ..." Yasna 32, verse 10;

"... [*ashavan-*] ..." Yasna 33, verses 1, and 3;

Insler translation 1975;

"... the creatures of truth ..." Gathas, Yasna 31, verse 1;

"... the creatures allied with truth ..." Gathas, Yasna 43, verse 6; Yasna 44, verse 10;

Insler translation 1975.

He says, "Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire ... good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 5, Insler translation 1975. So in mortals, good thinking is the incremental (and ultimately the complete) comprehension of truth.

He says, "... [*spenta-* 'beneficial'] is a man of [*aramaiti-* 'embodied truth'], he is so, by reason of his understanding, his words, his actions, his [*daena-* 'envisionment']..." Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 21; Insler translation 1975.

"... the beneficent man ... he serves truth, during his rule, with good word and good action. ..." Gathas, Yasna 31, verse 22; Insler translation 1975.

"... Fame is to serve Thee and the truth, [*mazda-* 'Wisdom'], ..." Gathas, Yasna 32, verse 6
Insler translation 1975.

So mortals have within them, the first 5 qualities of the Divine (although not completely, not perfectly).

And Zarathushtra says that we can attain all these qualities of the Divine, completely, perfectly (*haurvatat-*), at which time we will no longer be bound by mortality, because mortal existence is the matrix for the perfecting process. So when the perfecting process is complete, mortal existence is no longer necessary. And we attain a non-mortal state of being ~ which is non-deathness (*amertat-*).

What does all of this tell us? Many things. Here are a few.

It tells us that in Zarathushtra's thought mortals are not born sinful, corrupt, incapable of redeeming themselves. True, we are born with the capacity for evil, but also with a capacity for the divine.

It tells us that each time we think, speak and act in a way that embodies what is true, good, right, in that moment, we bring the Divine to life, in our selves, and in our world ~ even though we do so imperfectly, sporadically.

It shows us that Wisdom (*mazda-*) is not a tribal deity whose relevance is limited to a few thousand born-~Zoroastrians. Wisdom's Divine qualities are universal. And Zarathushtra tells us that with these qualities, Wisdom heals, not just a tribe, but all of existence, and that we should do so as well.

Zarathushtra says, "... By your rule, Lord, Thou shalt truly heal this world [*ahum* 'existence'] ..." Gathas, Yasna 34, verse 15, Insler translation 1975. And what is the Lord's rule? It is the rule of truth, its comprehension, its embodiment in thought, word and action (Y51.4).

And [healing existence](#) applies to us too. He says,

"... Therefore, may we be those who shall heal this world [*ahum-* 'existence'] ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 9, Insler 1975;

"...the loving man ... [*spenta-* 'beneficial'] through truth [*asha-*], watching over the heritage for all, is a world-healer [*ahum.bish* '(an) existence-healer'] and Thy ally ... [*mazda-* 'Wisdom']." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 2, Insler translation 1975.

Which brings us to the question: Where in the Gathas does it say that we should care for the environment?

Well, the requirement that we [heal existence](#) is one instance. The Avestan word which Insler translates as 'world', is, more literally, 'existence'. In fact in other verses, Insler himself translates this Avestan word as 'existence'. And Zarathushtra describes existence as the existences of matter (the material existence), as well as of mind (Y28.2, Y43.3). Our material existence includes other life forms, our earth. Therefore, being [one who heals existence](#), includes caring for, benefiting, healing, our earth ~ the environment in which we live ~ with truth, its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule.

So, each time you engage in a project ~ however small ~ that benefits other human beings, other life forms, our environment, you are partnering with Wisdom in being a healer of existence.

I'd like to leave you with a question. Put it on the back burner of your mind, and let your mind play over it. We will consider it in a future session.

If mortals presently have 5 qualities that comprise the nature the Divine, and can attain all 7 of them completely, perfectly, what does this tell us about the identity of the Divine in Zarathushtra's thought?

I welcome your questions.

¹ All references in these footnotes are to chapters in my website, <https://gathasofzarathushtra.com>.
The subject of this talk is further detailed on my website, in *Part One: The Nature Of The Divine*.

² The evidence from the Gathas, that the law of consequences (that we reap what we sow) is not given for punishment, but for enlightenment, is detailed in *Part Two: Asha & The Checkmate Solution*.

³ The evidence from the Gathas that Wisdom is not a 'God' of anger, who punishes fallible mortals, is further detailed in the following 2 chapters, in *Part Three: Is Wisdom a 'God' of Wrath, Enmity?* and *Adverse Consequences, Not Punishment*.

⁴ Detailed in *Part One: Does The Devil Exist ?*

⁵ The evidence from the Gathas on the meaning *spenta- mainyu-* and the ways in which this term is used in the Gathas, is detailed in *Part One: The Beneficial Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*.

⁶ The evidence from the Gathas, that is contrary to the notion of cosmic dualism ~ 2 uncreated deities, one all good and one all bad ~ is detailed in the following chapters:
In *Part One: The Beneficial Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*;
In *Part Six: Yasna 30:3 and 4*; and
In *Part Two: The Puzzle of Creation*.

⁷ The evidence from the Gathas on the meaning of *asha-*, *vohu- manah-*, *spenta- aramaiti-*, *vohu- xshathra-*, *haurvatat-* and *ameretat-* is detailed in the following chapters, all in *Part One*:
Truth, Asha; Good Thinking, Vohu Manah; Embodied Truth, Aramaiti; Good Rule, Vohu Xshathra & Power; Completeness & Non-Deathness, Haurvatat-, Ameretat-.

⁸ Zarathushtra uses *vahishta-* 'most-good' (the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness) almost as a word of art ~ for the Divine, for Its qualities, for Its teachings, for the words and actions that implement such teachings, and for the resulting good end/reward. This evidence is detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle Of The Most Good, Vahishta*.

⁹ The evidence from the Gathas that Wisdom is Zarathushtra's most used name for the Divine is detailed in *Part Three: Evolution of the Name(s) Ahura, Mazda*.

¹⁰ The evidence that the qualities of the Divine are objects of worship, praise, service, and esteem, is detailed.
In *Part One: Worship & Prayer*; and
In *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship*.