

Zoroastrian Identity

California Zoroastrian Center

National identity has its roots in culture and culture is anchored in history. Culture is a collection of thoughts, words, and deeds of a nation which have evolved in the course of millennia, expressed in the form of written and oral history.

Iranian Culture is comprised of two fundamental and distinct parts, each manifested in different form.

1. **Iran's Zoroastrian Culture** has a historical record of roughly 4000 years encompassing five enduring dynasties, starting with the Kianians and continuing with the historical Medes (Maad), Achaemenians (Hakhamaneshian), Parthian (Ashkanian), and Sassanid (Sassanian).
2. **Iran's Islamic Culture** has a recorded history of about 1400 years encompassing 89 dynasties, most have been of non-Iranian origins.

Iran's Zoroastrian Culture is made of the following two parts:

- **The Zoroastrian Philosophy**
- **The Zoroastrian Tradition**

The Zoroastrian Philosophy

The Zoroastrian Religion, which represents the ethical aspect of the culture, is based solely on the hymns of Zarathushtra, which reflects his wisdom and thoughts. These hymns are preserved in the book of the Gathas. The Gathas reveals the way to a good life for all humans and how to make this world a better place to live for everyone. In his poems and songs, Zarathushtra taught that happiness, freedom, and peace are based on the individual choice of three paramount principles of **Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds**. These three pillars describe the foundations of Zoroastrian Doctrine leading to individual and collective prosperity.

Zarathushtra's message is a positive, life-affirming one, which demands not so much belief, as reason and action on the part of every individual. It is not a prescriptive ethical guideline based on obedience, or fear, but rather, an ethic of personal responsibility and choices. Zarathushtra asked his followers to think with a clear mind and choose a life of intelligent reflection.

The Gathas of Zarathushtra, collection of Hymns and Songs documenting words of wisdom and thought-provoking guidelines emanating from the founder of the religion who lived about 3700 years ago. They are applicable to our modern life of the 21st century and because they are based on wisdom, logic, righteousness, and progression at an individual, community, and universal level, they are timeless.

Ancient Iran and the Zoroastrian Religion

Ancient Iran is the birthplace of the Zoroastrian religion. It was established on the greater Persian Plateau, an area of vast expanse, extending from the Indus River on the east to the Mediterranean Sea on the west, to the Ural Mountains on the north, and to the sea of Yemen on

the south. It grew in this region of many cultures and multiple ethnicities, striving to live in peace. As such, the Zoroastrian religion is a product of our ancestor's way of life and their culture. Since the religion is founded on knowledge, logic and progressive thinking, its ideals are consistent with the desires of the contemporary world and have been the focus of attention by scholars for hundreds of years. The primary emphasis on Freedom of Thought, Choice, Democracy and Liberty offered by Zoroastrianism is consistent with the needs of modern society.

In recent decades, many advanced international organizations around the world and numerous bright scientist and public leaders have paid attention to the Zoroastrian doctrine. It is our hope that this doctrine can be responsive to the needs of the modern world and its critical minded citizenry.

Zoroastrians in Iran

For centuries after the Arab invasion in 641BCE, Zoroastrians (or Zarathushtis) in Iran practiced their faith in quiet seclusion, in the face of extreme persecution. As opportunities presented themselves in the 20th century, they moved from the rural areas towards business, the professions and industry. Zoroastrian entrepreneurs were the first to introduce English and sports in schools; modernize irrigations and agriculture; set up steel, aluminum and plastic factories; promote a small scale automobile industry; start large scale construction projects; and endow hospitals and schools. In less than a century, Zoroastrians excelled in all walks of life- government, business, industry, arts and science.

Zoroastrians in India- The Parsis

Despite having lived in India for over a thousand years, the Parsis have maintained their religious identity, primarily because they did not proselytize. Over the centuries they have assimilated three separate cultures- the ancient Persian, the Indian, and the Western. A minuscule minority in India (less than .01% of the population), the Parsis have influenced the country well out of proportion to their numbers. Enterprising, highly literate and reputed for their honesty, they occupy a position of distinction in the business community. Under British rule in the 19th century, the Parsis became the earliest Indian industrialists and built the first great Indian industrial projects- ship building, aviation, steel, textiles, chemicals, nuclear energy, and have excelled in the arts and sciences. Noted for their integrity, philanthropy and pioneering spirit, they have founded hospitals, schools and other institutions, liberally extending their philanthropy beyond their own community.

Present day Zoroastrians

The number of Zoroastrians in the world today is about 200,000, with the highest concentrations in the 'homelands' of Iran (24,000-90,000) and India (70,000). In the past half century, Zarathushtis have emigrated around the world, seeking higher education and better opportunities. Wherever they have settled- in USA (11,000), Canada (6,000), Great Britain (5,000), Australia and New Zealand (3,500), Persian Gulf (2,200), Pakistan (2,200), Europe (1,000), the Far East (400) and elsewhere- Zoroastrians have prospered in business and the professions and served well the countries of their adoption. It is important to note that in some areas of the great Iranian Plateau particularly Kurdistan individuals are turning to their ancestral religion, Zoroastrianism.

The Gathas and Avesta

The Gathas is the name of the thought-provoking songs of Zarathushtra, and the foundation of the Zoroastrian religion. Although other texts reflecting later thoughts, practices, traditions, and

customs have been compiled in the Avesta, the Gathas are the precious jewel of the Avesta. The Gathas are accepted as the only words proclaimed by Zarathushtra himself.

Ahura Mazda

By definition AHURA MAZDA means “Mass Knowledge” which is the intelligence behind the whole creation as we know it. Our mission in life as intelligent beings is to renew this existence.

Fravahar

Fravahar is a symbol of uplifting progress, evolution, perfection and bliss for man, based on the three paramount principles of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds as shown in the three-sectioned wing of Fravahar and the limitless universe (the large center ring), combined with two essential ideals of wisdom (the facial features of Fravahar) and love (the smaller ring of devotion and importance of keeping a promise), moving forward and upward leading man toward progress, righteousness, and the blissful life (hand and the spread wings of Fravahar).

Fire

Zoroastrian rituals and prayers are solemnized in the presence of a Fire, which is scrupulously tended with sandalwood and frankincense and kept burning in a silver urn in the inner sanctum of every Zoroastrian “fire temple” also called “Darbe Mehr” or “Atash Kadeh” (house of Devine light). Fire is revered as a visible symbol of the Inner Light, the divine spark, that burns in each and every heart, a physical representation of Illumined Mind, Enlightenment and Truth. Fire provides energy, warmth, and light. Fire and light overcome darkness and enable vision and enlightenment.

The Teachings Zarathushtra

The teachings of Zarathushtra are based on ethics, humanism, logic, and goodness depicted on the three Paramount pillars of “Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds”. The Gathas tells us:

“There is one path only and that is the Righteous Path. Compliance with it leads to the best way of life.” (The Gathas, Yasna 43-9)

Duality in Zoroastrianism

The Gathas tells us that good and evil are the two opposing forces in the world and often the product of the Human mind, Good thoughts or Spenta Mainyu is opposed with Bad thoughts or Angra Mainyu (Ahriman). These are the philosophical description of man’s thinking process. In Zoroastrianism, Ahriman is not a competing supreme entity against Ahura Mazda but a regressive mentality standing against progressive mentality.

Asha or the world order

The word “Asha” in the vision of Zarathushtra means the world order and the law of consequences . Asha is based on logical organization of physical laws that govern the entire creation inner universe. As such there are no superstitions in Zoroastrianism.

It should be noted that interfering with the orderly system yields undesirable consequences damaging the quality of life. Creation is neutral and logical, we are the creatures that can make it chaotic and undesirable by our wrong choices. A good example in our time is the environmental pollution caused by mankind.

“Ahura Mazda, may we get closer to you by following the rules of Asha and discover the values of our body and soul.” (The Gathas, Yasna 28-2)

Perfection

From the ethical perspective and clear conscience mankind must take steps toward perfection to reach spiritual wholeness through attaining knowledge. The strategy is based on the concept of evolution.

“The reward for well doers is attainment of perfection and spiritual power.” (The Gathas, Yasna 31-21)

“Only with good thinking and having clear conscience one can achieve perfection.” (The Gathas, Yasna 33-8)

Freedom of thoughts, will and choice

In the Gathas freedom of choice is greatly advocated. In Zoroastrian religion, no one has the right to take away the freedom of thoughts, will and choice from anyone. In the Gathas, Yasna 30-2 Ashu Zarathushtra has reminded us that man is free to choose his way as he wishes, however has high hopes for man to use his good mind to reach the right path and happiness.

Human Rights

The Zoroastrian religion considers all men and women equal regardless of creed, sex, ethnicity, race, rationality, religious persuasion, political views, etc. Superior is only the one who follows the path of “Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds.” In Zarathustra’s message one sees that happiness, salvation, and good fortunes have been the desire and the focal points for all peoples of the world regardless of their backgrounds.

The first Declaration of Human Rights in world’s history was issued by Cyrus the Great, a Zoroastrian king of Achaemenian Dynasty in 538 B.C. Over 2500 years ago this great notion was based on the teachings of Zarathushtra and his emphasis on gender equality and freedom of choice.

“God has created man free” (The Gathas, Yasna 31-11)

The Value of Human Status and Life

In the Zoroastrian religion, the value of human status is considered to be equal with Ahura Mazda’s rank, provided men and women promote righteousness, goodness and betterment of life. In this belief system, the world is a sacred place and life is precious. Therefore, it is worthy of protection and preservation to keep life intact and in good faith. The burning torch of life should be passed on to the next generations, brighter and shinier than before.

The ultimate goal in life is to refresh this existence.

“Ahura Mazda is the kind friend and savior for all.” (The Gathas, Yasna 43-14)

Equality of Men and Women

In Zoroastrian religion, men and women enjoy equal rights. Wherever in the Gathas, Ashu Zarathushtra speaks to people, he mentions men and women together. In religious writings, there are always references to good men and women.
(the Gathas, Yasna 30-2)

Happiness and Bliss

In the Zoroastrian religion, God created the world to provide happiness, and in the rays of good Thoughts and Love, peace and tranquility were granted for man's bliss. (The Gathas, Yasna 44-6)

The foundation of worldwide happiness is summarized in the following Hymn of the Gathas:

"Happiness belongs to the one who brings happiness to others." (The Gathas, Yasna 43-1)

Darius the Great, a Zoroastrian king of Achaemenian Dynasty depicts his good wishes for all, carved on bas-relief stones of ancient remains of the Persian Empire.

Renewal, Renovation, and Re-creation

One of the outstanding philosophies of the Zoroastrian religion is renewal, renovation, and re-creation of the living world. Regression and non-creativity are discouraged and looked down in this faith.

"We wish to be amongst those who promote the world to progress and development addled man to achieve righteousness and purity." (The Gathas, Yasna 30-9)

Destiny and pre-destiny

In zarathushtra's vision, one draws his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds. Men and women do have the freedom of choice, but the consequences of their choices are the logical results of their actions. This is part of Asha and is governed by the physical laws of action and reaction.

"Good luck and bad luck are the making of one's deeds respectively." (The Gathas, Yasna 31-20)

Environmental protection

Harmony between man and nature, respect for all of Creation-Fire, Sun, Earth, and Water, keeping these elements clean, and promoting a mutually beneficial existence with these elements, is central to Zoroastrian thought, placing this ancient religion way ahead of its time. In the Gathas, Yasna 32-12 sacrificial or useless killing of animals is prohibited. In the Gathas, Yasna 32-10 protection of useful elements of life has been pointed out distinctly. Keeping the environment clean is one's religious duty.

The Final Message

Let us point to this final fact:

Zoroastrianism is a living religion where one should make a positive impact in this world while living a righteous life. One's purpose in life should be to promote and renew this existence true righteous acts. Acquired knowledge is the tool in this life long endeavor which can be attained by anyone.

Footnotes:

(1) The word Ashu with its plural form as Ashavan is applicable to someone who has a clean conscience for good thoughts, words and deeds, plus clean demeanor, and performance. He is conscientious for keeping his body, attire, home, district, city, region, country, and the world clean. He is a pragmatic environmentalist for both the material and spiritual world.

(2) Translation of the Gathas by Mobed Mobedan, the late Rostam Shahzadi