

Welcome everyone. This is the 3d session of the California Zoroastrian Center's seminar "Liberating Zarathushtra's Relevance". The title of this session is:

Worship, Prayer, The Path, & Its End.¹

Here again, Zarathushtra has some unusual ideas that have largely been forgotten under the influence of other mind-sets and religious paradigms. Before we get into the good stuff, let me give you 2 examples.

First example: In the Gathas, there is no notion that Wisdom (*mazda*) is pleased by our kneeling, or prostrating ourselves, or beating ourselves, or calling ourselves derogatory names. The only physical gesture of worship mentioned in the Gathas is an outstretched hand. One hand (Y28.1, Y50.8, Y29.5). In fact, the first Gatha (Yasna 28) starts with that gesture of worship,

'Hand outstretched [*ushtanaxasto*], with reverence [*nemangha*] ...' Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 1 my translation.

In ancient times, the outstretched, or open hand originated as a gesture of friendship, intended to show that the person did not have a weapon in his hand.

So the only physical gesture of worship in the Gathas, is this ancient gesture of friendship ~ an outstretched hand, ~ which corroborates Zarathushtra's thought, that the relationship between mortals and the Divine is that of a **friend** (Y43:14, Y44:1, Y46:2), **an ally, a partner** (Y31:21, Y44:2), as I detailed in Session 2 last month.

Yet, even though linguists all agree that 'Hand outstretched (*ushtanaxasto*) ...' is singular ~ one hand ~ they all translate it ~ interpretively ~ as (two) hands. In this way, they have changed what was originally a gesture that combined friendship and reverence, to one that is a two-handed gesture of supplication. There is nothing wrong with supplication. Zarathushtra frequently asks the Divine for help. But this inaccurate interpretive translation, changes Zarathushtra's focus of the relationship between mortals and the Divine from one of friendly partnership, to one of inherent dependency. This isn't just a question of ego. This materially distorts the focus of Zarathushtra's action oriented teaching in key areas, including the way to worship, the path to the Divine, and its End.

Second example: This concerns a part of the Kemna Mazda prayer. The first and second paragraphs of the Kemna Mazda are quotations from the Gathas. The 2d paragraph is a quotation of Yasna 44, verse 16.² Linguists disagree about the meanings of certain words. Here, I won't get into linguistics details. I will just show you how the mind-set of other religious paradigms has influenced the translation of a phrase ~ even by one of the finest

linguists, Insler, for whose translation I will always be grateful. But in this instance, I disagree with it. The phrase in question is,

... *ahum.bish.ratum*³ *chizhdi* at hoi *vohu seraosho jantu manangha*

Eminent linguists (including Insler) are of the opinion that in Gathic Avestan, *ratum* can mean both 'judge' and also 'judgment' (as a mental quality, like having good judgment or bad judgment).⁴ In this instance, Insler chose 'judge'. His translation reads,

"... As world-healer, promise [*chizhdi*] us a judge [*ratum*], and let obedience [*seraosho*] to him come through good thinking, ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 16, Insler translation 1975.

Now, here is a guy ~ Zarathushtra ~ who says in the famous Yasna 30, verse 2, in Insler's own translation, that we should listen to what others say that is good, ~ and then think for ourselves, make our own decisions ~ arrive at our own judgments.

"Listen [*sraota-*] with your ears to the best things [*vahishta-* '(what is) most good'].
Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man for himself ~ upon the two choices of decision ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 2, Insler translation 1975.

Does it make sense that here, Zarathushtra tells us we must think for ourselves, but in a later song, he asks the Divine to give us a judge, who will do our thinking for us?

In the Gathas, there is no intermediary ~ neither judge nor priest ~ between man and the Divine. The relationship is direct. Returning to the Kemna Mazda, here again is the phrase from the Gathas in the Insler translation.

"... As world-healer, promise [*chizhdi*] us a judge [*ratum*], and let obedience [*seraosho*] to him come through good thinking, ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 16, Insler translation 1975.

Insler has translated *seraosho* as 'obedience'. This is a key requirement of many religious paradigms. But not Zarathushtra's.

'Good thinking (*vohu- manah-*)', by definition, requires that we think.
'Obedience' requires that we do what we are told ~ give up thinking for ourselves.

The word *seraosho* derives from *srao-/sru* which linguists generally agree means 'to listen'. Translating *seraosho* more literally, resolves the problem, as you will see.

Finally, the word *chizhdi* which Insler has translated as 'promise us' has not yet been decoded. Other linguists have variously translated its verb stem *cish-* as 'direct', 'accord', 'reveal',⁵ 'assure', and 'teach'.⁶ I think, 'teach' is the only translation option that fits the context, giving us, in a more literal translation,

"... Teach existence-healing-judgment
[*ahum.bish.ratum chizhdi*],

then to it, let **listening** come through good thinking,
[at hoi vohu **seraosh**o jantu manangha] ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 16, my translation.

Here, **listening** is listening to our own judgment, which we have learned from Wisdom ~ judgment that is existence-healing. Having the kind of good judgment that heals existence, is a part of good thinking (vohu~ manah-). So with a more literal, less interpretive, translation the inconsistency of **obedience** to a **judge** who does our thinking for us, is resolved.

These translation choices are corroborated in another Gatha verse in which Zarathushtra asks Wisdom to teach us through good thinking ~ through understanding truth ~ how to live our lives.

"...instruct through good thinking (the course) of my direction, ..." Gathas, Yasna 50, verse 6, Insler translation 1975.

Prayer.

Let us now consider Zarathushtra's ideas on prayer. He does not dictate any specific prayers that must be recited. Instead, he talks to the Divine, directly, in the language of his day, about anything and everything:

Asking Prayers.

About his hunger for knowledge: "...which man did fix the course of the sun and of the stars? ... These things indeed and others, I wish to know [*mazda* 'Wisdom']." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 3, Insler translation 1975;

About his rejection by his community, "... They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan..." Gathas Yasna 46, verse 1, Insler translation 1975;

About his anxieties regarding whether he will ever be able to persuade others of the validity of his teachings,

"...How shall I bring to life that vision of mine,..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 9, Insler translation 1975;

"...how shall I, with your accord, impassion your following,..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 17, Insler translation 1975;

"...How might I deliver deceit into the hands of truth, ..." Gathas, Yasna 44, verse 14, Insler translation 1975.

These are what I call 'asking prayers' The Gathas are full of 'asking prayers', and Zarathushtra tells us that if a prayer has two ingredients, the Divine will always answer. These two ingredients are **good purpose** and **love**.

He says,

"...For I know that **words** deriving from **good purpose** and from **love** are not to be left wanting by you." Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 10, Insler translation 1975.

Notice, he does not require any formulaic prayers ~ we can just use **words**. And he does not say that we will get what we ask for. He says that such prayers will **not be left wanting**. They will always be answered in a way that benefits us ~ even though it may not be in the way we want or expect.

Now these asking prayers are not a question of inherent dependency on the Divine ~ without bothering to make an effort ourselves. They are something quite different. They are a part of the mutual, loving help between the Divine, each other, and all the living, that is at the very core of Zarathushtra's teaching. Mutual, loving help is necessary to bring about spiritual growth, spiritual evolution. This is such a key element of Zarathushtra's thought, that it survived even destructive wars and persecution. The Pahlavi High Priest Zadsparam wrote that "mutual assistance" is the 3d requirement for the renovation of existence. The Divine is so generous, that I think, even when we pray in foolish ways, asking for foolish things, the opportunity is used to help us in some good way. I don't think any prayer, however foolish, is ever wasted.

But when Zarathushtra asks the Divine for help, for support, he does so in an unusual way. He does not ask that those who are persecuting him be blown up in a satisfying bang! Nor does he ask the Divine to make his troubles go away. Our troubles are the way we grow. Instead, he asks for help in a way that teaches us something ~ a way that does not make us inherent dependents. Here are a few examples. See if you can pick up on what he is trying to teach us.

"What help **by truth** hast Thou for Zarathushtra who calls? What help **by good thinking** hast Thou for me, ... ?" Gathas, Yasna 49, verse 12, Insler translation 1975.

After being driven away from his family and clan, he says: "...Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend. Let me see the **power of good thinking** allied **with truth** !" Gathas, Yasna 46, verse 2, 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 [asha-], [mazda 'Wisdom']**... come to me ... give support to me. **Through good thinking**, find a means of destruction of this." Gathas, Yasna 49, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

As you can see, in each of these instances, it is truth, and its comprehension good thinking, which are the tools through which he asks the Divine to support, protect, help. It is then up

to us, to translate this increased understanding into effective and beneficial thoughts, words and actions that embody truth (*spenta- aramaiti-*) ~ factual truths, as well as the truths of mind/heart/spirit. And in the last quotation, did you notice how Zarathushtra himself tries to help the poorly protected? ~ he does so with **truth**, ~ with all the qualities implicit in the true, (correct, good) order of existence *asha*. Now I agree that we often are limited in what we can do. Perhaps the answer is to do the very best we can, and then leave the rest in the hands of the Divine.

So these are examples of 'asking' prayers.

The Worship of 'Giving' Prayers.

But the Gathas also reveal a form of worship that I call 'giving prayers'. In many verses, Zarathushtra tells us to worship Wisdom with Its own Divine qualities. Here are 2 examples. He says,

"Yes, praising, I shall always **worship** ... you, [*mazda ahura* 'Wisdom, Lord'], **with truth and the very best thinking and with their rule...**" Gathas, Yasna 50, verse 4, Insler translation 1975;

"I shall try to glorify Him for us with **prayers of [*aramaiti-*]** ..." Gathas, Yasna 45, verse 10, Insler translation 1975. Prayers of *aramaiti-* are prayers of thoughts, words and actions that embody the true (correct, good) order of existence (*asha-*).

We can have the best laws, the best constitutions, the best corporate charters, in the world, but they don't mean a thing unless we implement them, make them effective, with our choices in thought, word and action.

In short, Zarathushtra teaches us to worship the Divine by infusing divine qualities ~ truth (*asha-*), its comprehension (*vohu- manah-*), its embodiment (*spenta- aramaiti-*), its rule (*vohu- xshathra-*), a beneficial way of being (*spenta- mainyu-*) ~ into every aspect of our activities, our relationships, our lives ~ at home, in our families, in the business world, in academia, in government, in our professions, in our treatment of other life forms, in our treatment of the environment. A 'living' worship, in every sense of the word.

In Zarathushtra's thought, the fragrance of a life well lived, is the incense of worship ~ our 'giving' prayers.

I love this form of worship. To think that in the hustle and bustle of our lives, our ordinary thoughts, words and actions, are acts of worship if governed by truth, goodness, generosity, gives meaning and beauty to the everyday things we do, and to the notion of 'worship'.

Implicit in this kind of worship is a unity of endeavor required to bring about the desired end. What Wisdom requires of us, He delivers of Himself, ~ His divine qualities (the amesha

spenta). There is no double standard here between what it's O.K. for the Divine to do, and what mortals should do.

Implicit in this kind of worship is the unique idea that even divine qualities, to be worth anything, must be brought to life, given substance, in the material reality of our existence.

And this kind of worship makes us aware of how inextricably interconnected we are. When we so worship with our thoughts, words and actions, it is impossible to advance ourselves, spiritually, without at the same time benefiting the people and the circumstances affected by our thoughts, words and actions.

Of course, it is easy to *talk* about it. But how do we *know*, in a given situation, what is true, good, right? Different individuals, different generations, different cultures, can have very different ideas about it. Zarathushtra's answer is simple. We search for truth ~ on-going ~ a search from which he does not exempt himself. He says,

"... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [*asha-*]. Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord ..." Gathas, Yasna 28, verses 4 - 5, Insler translation 1975.

And what is the *way to the Lord*? In the Gathas, it is the 'path(s) of truth' (Y51:13; Y33:5) and its comprehension, the 'path(s) of good thinking' (Y51:16, Y34:12 and 13); Insler translation.

In fact, later Avestan texts state, more than once.

(There is) one path, that of truth, all others (are) non-paths.'
aevo pantau yo ashahe vispe anyaesham apantam.
my translation.

Yasna 72, § 11; *Visperad* Ch. 24, § 3;
Post Avestan *Vendidad* concluding colophon.

A *path* is an on-going way of living. Zarathushtra's *path(s) of truth* and its comprehension *good thinking* are an on-going search for truth, and its incremental acquisition, in what Zarathushtra calls, *both existences ~ the existences of matter and mind* (Y28:2, Y43:3) ~ scientific truth, social truth, spiritual truth, all the many facets of the true (correct, good) order of existence ~ a search that enables the growth of knowledge and understanding. So this teaching includes within it the capacity for truth-oriented change. If we have the courage to follow this teaching ~ to search for truth, on-going ~ we acquire continuing relevance. If we don't, we become trapped, imprisoned, in obsolescence.

We sometimes question whether truth (*asha-*) is subjective or objective. I think, in Zarathushtra's thought, truth is objective. It is our attempts at understanding truth that are

subjective, that vary from culture to culture, and from generation to generation. But through experience, as we grow in understanding, our perceptions become more and more accurate until finally, truth, and our understanding of it, is the same.

So when he says, "Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire... good thinking..." Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 5, Insler translation 1975, he is asking a rhetorical question which contains its own answer ~ that good thinking is the (incremental, and ultimately the complete) comprehension of truth.

Which brings us to the ultimate 'giving prayer' that is a quality of the Divine, ~ completeness and non-deathness.

Zarathushtra says,

"...Your enduring worshipful offering has been established to be [*ameretat-* 'non-deathness'] and completeness [*haurvatat-*]." Gathas, Yasna 33, verse 8, Insler translation 1975.

What does he mean by this? I think he means that the ultimate worship offering desired by Wisdom, is our own joyful self realization of the wisdom within ~ fulfilling our best potential by helping ourselves, and all the living, to attain, personify, truth completely (*haurvatat-*), resulting in the perfecting of each fragment of existence, which then is no longer bound by mortality (*ameretat-*), ~ mortality being the matrix for the perfecting process.

In short: When we *worship* the Divine with its own qualities, we incrementally attain these qualities. And the *path* to the Divine is another way of saying the same thing. If we choose the path of truth with each thought, word and action, we ultimately personify truth. The path and its end are the same ~ except in one respect: The path is still unperfected, whereas the End is perfected. I will give you evidence of this in the next session.

I would like to leave you with some questions. Place them on the back burner of your mind, and let your mind play over them.

If, as Zarathushtra states, the path of truth leads to an End that is truth personified, what is his perception of the ultimate good End ~ paradise? A state of being? A place? And when does paradise begin? We will consider these questions in the next session.

Poetry & Songs.

I would like to close this session with a brief mention of poetry and song. It starts out a little sad, but it has the potential for a bright future, a joyful renaissance. Here, by 'song' I do not mean the chanting of prayers, which (if you close your eyes and listen) has a sad, haunting quality. I mean the songs people create to express what moves them, inspires them, makes them happy.

In Zarathushtra's day, music was so important a part of people's lives, and spirituality, that he uses the name "[House of Song](#)" as one of his terms for the good End (paradise) ~ a state of being that 'houses' the bliss, the high, we feel when we hear or sing beautiful music ~ indicating the rich tradition of music, and its enjoyment, that must have existed in his time. In fact, he even used poems and songs ~ the Gathas ~ to express his teachings.

But the joyful music, which so pervaded Avestan life and Zarathushtra's worship, is absent from the forms of worship engaged in by Zoroastrians today.

How could this have happened?

Well, music has to be expressed. It is heard. Its existence, therefore, cannot not be kept secret. Following the invasion of Iran in 650 CE, Zoroastrians frequently were hard pressed just to stay alive. Their's was not an environment in which the Divine could be worshipped with music and joyful songs. Even those who fled to India carried with them a religion bereft of its rich, ancient musical tradition.

But now, in diaspora, we have a chance to change this narrative. As Zarathushtra's beautiful ideas are re-discovered, and as they inspire the love and devotion they once did in ancient times, creative people can once again express the love they feel for Zarathushtra's teachings, in a renaissance of music, songs, poems. Let us not crush such creativity under the heel of tradition. Let us nurture it, encourage it to bloom and flourish, so that we can once again celebrate the Divine with the joys of music and song.

I welcome your questions.

¹ All references to my website are to <https://gathasofzarathushtra.com>.

References and additional details on this topic are on my website in the following chapters,

In *Part One: Worship & Prayer*; (at a basic level), and

In *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship*; (at a more in-depth level), and

In *Part Two: A Question of Reward & The Path* (one of my favorite chapters!).

² On my website, in Part Six, there is a chapter called *Yasna 44:16*. Except for its first line, this verse is quoted verbatim as the 2d paragraph of the Kemna Mazda prayer. In the foregoing chapter I translate this verse, discuss its meaning, and also give a word by word linguistic analysis with comparative translations by a group of eminent, professional linguists.

³ As I have explained in the chapter *Yasna 44:16*, all manuscripts (available to Geldner) show these three components ~ [ahum.bish.ratum](#) ~ as separate words. But this presents a grammatical tangle, which some scholars have attempted to solve by taking [ahum.bish](#) as a compound word, and [ratum](#) as a separate word. In this instance, I follow Bartholomae, Moulton and Taraporewala in taking [ahum.bish.ratum](#) as one compound word. It solves the grammatical problem. It is linguistically defensible, and gives us a translation that fits the context of this verse, and is consistent with the Gathas as a whole, (detailed in *Part Six: Yasna 44:16*).

⁴ Detailed with references in *Part Three: Ratu*.

⁵ Zoroastrians like to debate whether or not Zarathushtra believed his teachings to be 'revelation'. I think it is a mistake to try to fit Zarathushtra's thought into today's religious or philosophical 'labels' ~ most of which may not have existed in his time period. It is better to consider the substance of the question.

On the one hand 'revelation' seems to imply that the Divine has 'revealed' to a human being, fact specific matters. Zarathushtra's teachings are not a list of fact specific do-s and dont-s, so in that sense, his teachings are not 'revelation'. On the other hand, a 'revelation' could mean a wordless communication of ideas, insight, understanding, illumination, from the Divine. Throughout the Gathas, Zarathushtra asks questions of the Divine, asks for understanding, asks the Divine to instruct him *through good thinking*. If this is 'revelation' then all of us receive 'revelation' from the Divine from time to time.

⁶ Detailed in *Part Six: Yasna 44:16*

Beekes 1988 "teach";

Inslar 1975 "promise";

Humbach/Faiss 2010 "direct";

Humbach 1991 "accord";

Taraporewala 1951 "reveal";

Moulton 1912 and Bartholomae "assure".