

# Devotion to Wisdom

Mazdayasna: the philosophy of Zarathushtra

# A Thought Catalyst

This presentation is a brief overview of Zarathushtra's teachings in the Gathas, which literally mean thought provoking songs.

It is a compilation of the work of several Mazdayasni scholars whom I deeply respect.

As Mazdayasna encourages each individual to think for oneself and utilize our Good Mind in search of the Ultimate Truth - the goal of this presentation is to serve as a ***thought catalyst and spur discussion on improving our existence.***

Core Message



Zarathushtra teaches a system, a way of looking at our reality, a way of life that is timeless.

In essence, he teaches:

1. that throughout our lives, we are confronted by choices;
2. that we should use our minds and hearts to search for the Truth, for what is right and good, in all aspects of our reality,
3. and choose it, with each thought, word, and action, by engaging the world, not rejecting it,
4. thereby perfecting our world and ourselves,
5. until we become one with the Divine, until we become a part of the "Endless Lights."

# Brief History



"A great god is Ahura Mazda who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created *happiness* for man, who created me, Artaxerxes ..."

Inscription from King Artaxerxes III from the 4th century BCE - cast taken from sculptures on the Palace of Darius at Persepolis, Iran.

Zarathushtra called his teachings Daena Vanguhi meaning "Good Conscience". A little later, his disciples coined a new befitting term, mazda-yasna, meaning "Devotion to Wisdom". Similar to the Greek philo-sophia or "Love of Wisdom".

Mazdayasna is also known as Zoroastrianism and is one of the world's oldest continuously practiced religions. It is a spiritual philosophy **focused on improving existence through self-realization and realization of the Divine.**

Zarathushtra's teachings are captured in 17 songs called the Gathas, in an extinct Iranian language called Avestan. Avestan was not well understood until linguists decoded it in the 18th century after noticing similarities to Vedic Sanskrit.



Detail of The School of Athens by Raphael, 1509, showing Zoroaster (left, with star-studded globe).

Linguistic evidence dates the Gathas to ~1,700 BCE, over 3,700 years ago!  
Zarathushtra was part of the Iranian pastoral tribes living in eastern Greater Iran - possibly near the Aral Sea.

Zoroastrian philosophy was influential during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid Iranian empires that spanned from 550 BCE to 651 CE.

Zoroastrians were severely persecuted following the Muslim invasion of the Sassanid Iranian Empire and the religion declined in prevalence over the subsequent centuries.



Asha - Ultimate Truth



# The Quest for Truth

In the Gathas, the **Divine is the source of all goodness** and the creation that Ahura Mazda conceives of, in his wisdom, is called Asha. It is a perfect existence, in purely ideal terms. This mental ideal was then actualized in the world of matter.

Zarathushtra views the existences of mind and matter as two complementary parts of our current reality. The existence of matter is the matrix for our spiritual growth through Free Will.

And this spiritual growth comes from the quest for Asha - often translated as Truth - in both these dimensions: the physical and material, and the mental and spiritual.

But what is Truth? How is it defined?



# Asha is the Best Good

In the material or physical world, Truth is what is accurate - the laws that govern the universe - physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy - the natural order of things.

In the mental world of ideas, Truth is that which is right for all of existence - pure righteousness. In the Gathas, this includes such notions as goodness, justice, compassion, generosity, solicitude, beneficence, loving-kindness – in essence - the ideal order of things in the world of mind and spirit.

Asha is the relationship of all things in perfect harmony such that nothing occurs at the expense of something else. It also includes the notion of social justice. No one prospers at the cost of somebody's injury. **Asha is the Best Good: the perfect, true, entirely good, ideal order of existence.**



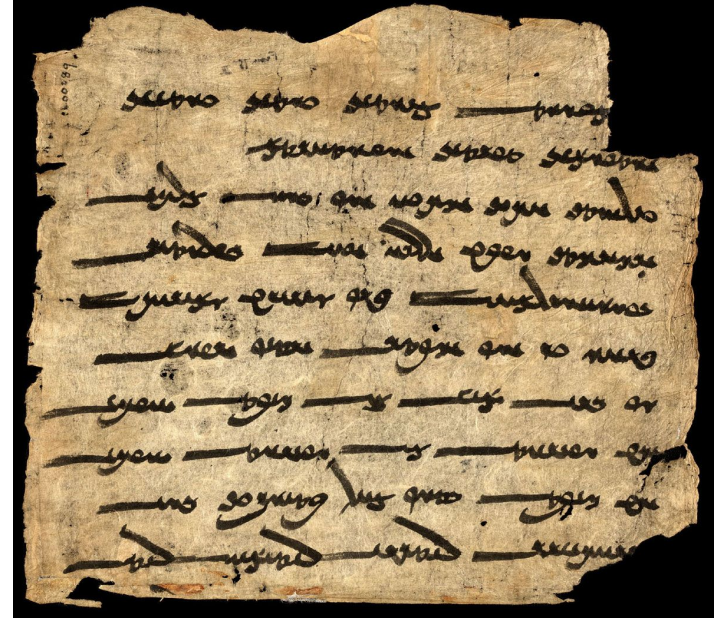
# Truth is Radiant Happiness

Zarathushtra urges us to seek the Truth in all aspects of existence: with our every thought, word, and deed. This includes scientific truth, philosophic truth, social truth, spiritual truth, and what is true or right in our relationships – with each other, with our environment, and with other life forms.

This is emphasized in the foundational Ashem Vohu prayer:

*“Righteousness [Asha] is the best good. It is radiant happiness. Radiant happiness comes to the person to whom righteousness is for the **sake of the best righteousness alone.**”*

This search for Truth, when desired for the sake of Truth alone -- not to go to “heaven” or some other reward, not from fear of “hell” or “bad karma” -- but simply for its own sake, leads to true, radiant happiness - an enlightened state of being that radiates naturally to all existence.



The oldest extant Zoroastrian text, [this Ashem Vohu](#) dates from the 9th century from Dunhuang, China, and is written in Sogdian, a medieval Iranian language.

# Moral Vectors

# Ways of Being - “Good” vs “Evil”

Zarathushtra presents our reality as a conflict between two diametrically opposed ways of being (mainyu), they stand for mental attitudes in the spiritual domain, and also opposing moral vectors in all of physical existence.

The **Beneficial Way of Being (Spenta Mainyu) is the vector that promotes Asha, towards the light, towards the best existence.** And the Destructive Way of Being (Angra Mainyu) moves away from Asha, away from the light.

*“Now, the two foremost mainyus, known to be imaginary twins, are the better and the bad in thoughts, words, and deeds. ... Now, when the two mentalities first got together, they created “life” and “not-living.”* Gathas Y30.3-4

This dualist moral doctrine was later translated as a binary struggle of “Good vs Evil” - and personified with a dualist theology - but in the Gathas, **this struggle is one that occurs within the individual via our choices.**



# Spiritual Growth through Free Will

The universe is to be understood as a potentially ideal evolution in which there is the possibility of both the movement towards goodness (Asha) but also the movement towards frustration.

Zarathushtra proposes that **the world is capable of being perfected by the actions of humans by reason of their capacity of moral choice.**

It is through the experiences of our material existence, with the law of consequences through Asha, that enables us to utilize Free Will to choose, learn, and grow spiritually - both individually and collectively.

Through Free Will, we can iteratively comprehend and realize Asha, the entirely good, true order of existence and eventually banish all evil and suffering from existence.

Thus the importance of the well-known Zoroastrian motto:

***Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds***



# Realization of the Divine

# The Comprehension and Embodiment of Asha leads to Serenity

Zarathushtra's philosophy is constructed on the following abstract concepts, they are Divine Aspects of Ahura Mazda, and a **framework through which the Divine is known and realized**:

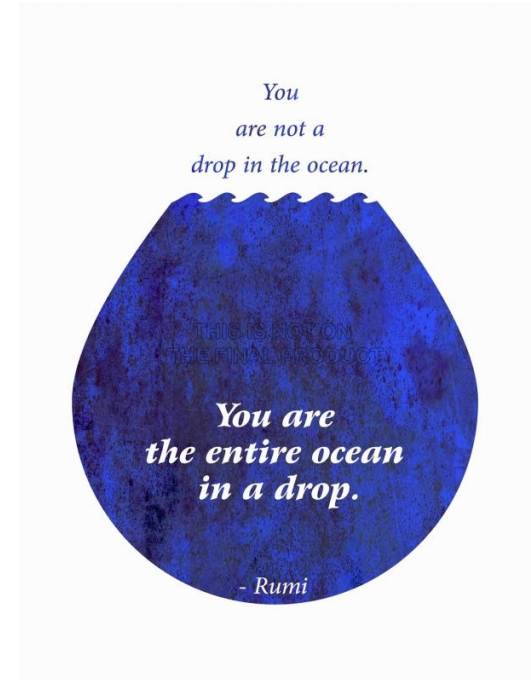
- **Ultimate Truth** (Asha) - the highest form of goodness and righteousness, the entirely good, true order of ideal existence
- **Good Mind** (Vohu Manah) - the comprehension of Asha (Truth) and recognizing the disparity between the ideal and the real, it is the instrument of moral cognition and our conscience
- **Embodied Truth** (Spenta Armaity) - the embodiment of Truth through one's thoughts, words, and deeds - it is characterized by benevolence and serenity





# Progressing all existence, realizing the Divine completely, makes us whole

- **Good Rule** (Vohu Khshathra) - the rule of Truth, utilizing Good Mind and Embodied Truth to bring about the ideal, purely good society through our individual and collective thoughts, words, and deeds
- **Completeness** (Haurvatat) - this is the complete attainment of Truth, perfectly and completely for all existence. Realizing the Divine completely and progressing all of existence, making us whole
- **Non Deathness** (Ameretat) - the state of immortal bliss where we transcend mortal existence, we become one with the Divine, and part of the "Endless Lights" -- a metaphor for enlightenment



# The Nature of the Divine

# Lord of Life and Wisdom

The name Zarathushtra uses for the Divine, Ahura Mazda, is a way of revealing Its nature in addition to the Divine Aspects.

Ahura meaning “lord” is one who has mastered, and attained the Divine Aspects including non-deathness and therefore also has lordship over life and mortality.

Mazda meaning “wisdom” is another word for enlightenment. Realizing the Divine through the experience of thoughts, words and actions of Asha is enlightenment and subsequently wisdom personified.

The Divine is both Ahura and Mazda which includes having both the ability and wisdom of the Divine Aspects, and also includes **helping others to attain them, so we can reach completeness.**



# Rethinking the Divine as wholly and entirely Good

Zarathushtra's innovation was that it wasn't *who* a being is, that makes It Divine. It is *what* a being is, the nature of the being, that makes it Divine, worthy of worship. Ahura Mazda is the best good, the best existence, wisdom personified.

We do not worship Ahura Mazda because of the power held over us (fear of hell) and the favor we wish to gain (heaven). We worship Ahura Mazda because it is worthy of reverence as the ideal of goodness and wisdom.

And worship in the Gathas, is through love, partnership, and embodiment of the Divine -- which reinforces the importance of the Divine Aspects as a framework for spiritual growth and evolution.

The Divine is beneficial, wholly good, it means to be enlightened through the realization of Asha and also to help others to become enlightened.



# Growth and Purpose

# The Purpose of our Material Existence is to Grow Spiritually

In the Gathas, the **purpose of life is to evolve or grow** from a conflicted state of being that is a mixture of harmful and more beneficial\*, **to a state of being that is completely, wholly, good and beneficial**. A state of being that personifies the Divine Aspects completely (Haurvatat).

The religions of Zarathushtra's society operated on a paradigm of fear (as many religions today). One either obeyed or was punished. One either worshipped through acts or extravagant gifts to the gods (through their priests, naturally), or one was punished.

Natural calamities, sickness, poverty, suffering - all were supposedly 'punishments' from the god(s) in Zarathushtra's society.



# Freeing us from the Paradigm of Fear

It was precisely this fear-based paradigm that Zarathushtra rejected - proposing a way of looking at our reality, that is without fear:

He presents the **Divine as entirely good, wholly beneficial, a Friend, whose existence is the true, correct order of existence** (Asha). The way that our reality is ordered through Asha, it includes the law of consequences in which we learn via Free Will - through all of our choices.

Given our Good Mind - the ability to reason and comprehend Truth - when we experience harmful or “bad” consequences of a choice, it increases our understanding and compassion. There is no punishment or forgiveness, the purpose of the law of consequences is enlightenment. Similarly beneficial choices are reinforced and also learned from.

Mortal existence is the matrix that enables the experiences necessary for our spiritual growth to realize Asha and the Divine.



# Humankind and the Divine



# Allies, co-workers, friends

In the Gathas, the relationship between the Divine and human beings is not authoritarian. It is not described as that of a master to a slave or servant, nor a parent to a child.

This relationship is described as **a friend to a friend, an ally, and a partner\***. It is a paradigm based on mutual love and interconnectedness. We are our own saviors utilizing the Divine within!

The Divine Aspects are a framework for realizing the Divine and Zarathushtra says that **we can attain all these qualities**, completely. To do this - to express divine values through material words and actions, it is impossible to advance ourselves, spiritually, without at the same time advancing our material world – making it a better place!



\* Y44.1, Y46.2, Y44.2

# Humankind and God are part of the same Whole

In the Gathas Y30.9, Zarathushtra says:

*"Therefore, may we be those who shall heal this world!"*

Heal from what? Healing, progressing, improving from the disparity between reality and the best existence, Asha. Through the Divine Aspects, we realize the Divine by bringing Asha to life completely, perfectly, for all existence.

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 and the Divine in being a healer of existence.**

Once we've attained all of the Divine Aspects, we realize **Zarathustra's idea that humankind and God are part of the same Whole.** And that when we are Wisdom personified, perfectly complete, we become one with the Divine and part of the "Endless Lights".



# Summary

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra teaches a practical, spiritual philosophy focused on improving existence through self-realization and realization of the Divine. To recap:

1. **Goodness & Truth** - the Divine is wholly good, beneficial, our friend and ally -- Asha is the ideal, perfect, and wholly good order of existence, the way existence should be
2. **Free Will & Growth** - human beings are free to choose, learn from our choices, and adjust -- we can grow and realize Asha through our thoughts, words, and deeds
3. **Realizing Wisdom** - all of the Divine Aspects are attainable by us as we seek to realize Truth and Wisdom, mortal existence is the matrix for this spiritual growth
4. **Healing Existence** - to realize Truth and Wisdom, we must heal all of existence -- we do this by actively engaging life and helping others to grow -- no one can do this in isolation
5. **Completeness** - humankind and the Divine are parts of the same Whole, by progressing all existence to be entirely good we become completely whole, and transcend mortal existence, reaching an enlightened state of being -- Endless Lights!



# Sources and Acknowledgements

This presentation brings together various works from:

- Dina G. McIntyre - [Gathas of Zarathushtra](#) and [CZC Seminar Liberating Zarathustra's Relevance](#)
- Dr. Kaikhosrov D. Irani - [Introduction to the Gathas](#) and [Zarathushtrian Philosophy](#)
- Dr. Ali A. Jafarey - <https://zoroastrian.org/articles/salient.htm>

With immense gratitude, I have learned so much from these amazing scholars 🙏

You may also find the California Zoroastrian Center's [Public Relations Website](#) as a useful resource.

Wishing you all radiant happiness 🔥 ushtā!

Navid Mansourian

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# Discussion