

Devotion to Wisdom

Part III: the Modern and Living Philosophy of the Gathas

A Thought Catalyst

This presentation is part III of a series of talks presented by the [Public Relations Committee](#) of the California Zoroastrian Center - [part I](#) provided a brief overview of Mazdayasna per the Gathas and [part II](#) dove deeper into Asha and the Search for Truth.

In these talks, we explore the Divine Attributes, a framework for realizing the Divine and self-realization. Today, we will explore how this framework provides a modern and living philosophy for everyday life.

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

A Brief Historical Recap

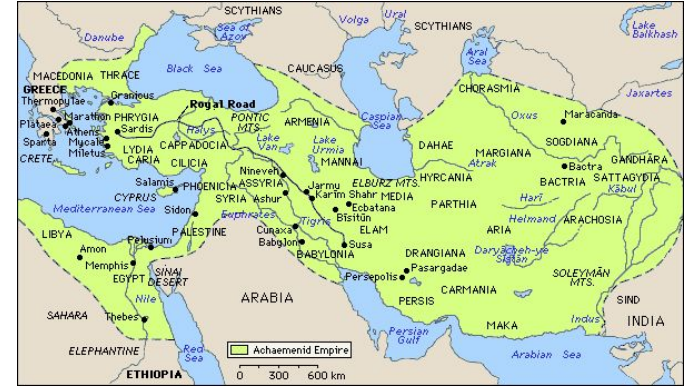
Zarathushtra called his teachings Daena Vanguhi meaning "Good Conscience". A little later, his disciples coined a new befitting term, mazda-yasna, meaning "Devotion to Wisdom".

Zarathushtra's teachings are captured in 17 songs called the Gathas, in an ancient Iranian language called Avestan.

Linguistic evidence dates the Gathas to ~1700 BCE and to eastern Greater Iran, possibly near the Aral Sea. Avestan was not well understood until 18th century linguists decoded it after noticing similarities to Vedic Sanskrit.

Zarathushtra's teachings were prevalent during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid Iranian empires that spanned from 550 BCE to 651 CE.

Zoroastrians were persecuted almost to extinction following the Arab Muslim invasion of the 7th century, but thankfully, the Gathas of Zarathushtra have survived as part of the Avesta.



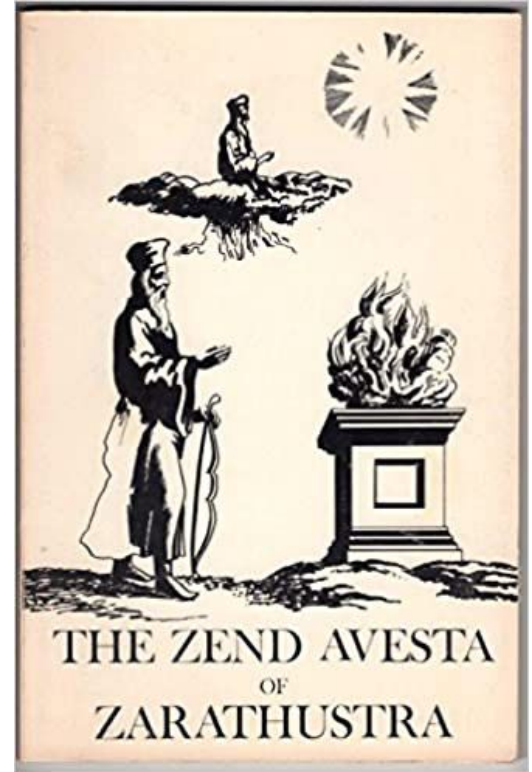
Introduction to the Avesta

The Avesta is commonly referred to as the Zoroastrian “holy book”. Tradition says it was put in writing in the very earliest of times but we do not have evidence of when this may have been until the 5th century CE during the Sassanid Empire.

Although the Avesta includes the teachings of Zarathushtra at the center of the Yasna liturgy, it's **more accurate to refer to the Avesta as an encyclopedia of sorts** that represents the understanding and commentary of that period.

It's important to note that the Avesta was completed over 2,000 years after Zarathushtra when the Avestan language was no longer spoken nor well understood.

Following the Arab Muslim invasion of Iran, many libraries and books including religious texts were destroyed. It's estimated about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the Avesta has survived but thankfully the Gathas of Zarathushtra were memorized and are intact.



The Gathas are about 8% of the extant Avesta

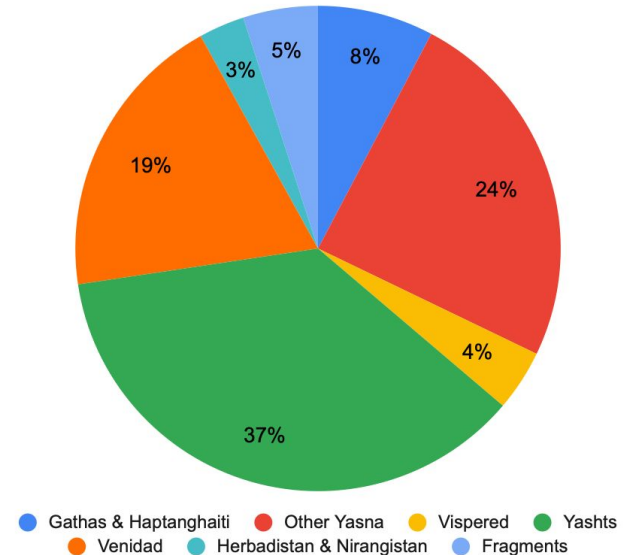
The extant Avesta was reshaped after the 10th century into roughly six books:

- Yasna - liturgical collection with the Gathas & Haptanghaiti, hymns from Zarathushtra's immediate disciples, at its center in Old Avestan
- Vispered - focused on all festivals and the lunisolar year
- Yashts - poems about pre-Zarathushtrian deities and also incantations by post-Zarathushtra temple priests in honor of Ahura Mazda and the personification of Gathic concepts
- Venidad - laws of purification and regulations against pollution from evil deities (daevas) - may have roots in pre-Aryan Iran
- Herbadistan & Nirangistan - all about the priesthood and rites
- Fragments - misc texts of varying lengths, many incomplete

Interestingly, the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti comprise just 8% of the words in the Avesta. The rest pulls from traditions before and after Zarathushtra.

What about the Khordeh Avesta? The Khordeh (smaller) Avesta is a more recent digest of Avestan prayers many of which are supplemented by late Middle Persian pieces. It's unstandardized and versions can vary between 4,000-20,000 words - only 183 of which come from the Gathas.

Avesta by approximate % of words



Religion or Philosophy?

People sometimes debate whether the Gathas teach a religion or a philosophy. Religion, in our age, often refers to faith in a superhuman power or God who “reveals” their will and the path for “salvation” to a special prophet.

The focus is often on obedience to commandments, dogma, and belief in static explanations about what has happened and what will happen - which is heavily tied to ideas of predeterminism, prophecies, and being “saved”.

In contrast, philosophy literally means love (philo) of wisdom (sophia) strikingly similar to Mazda (Wisdom) yasna (worship or devotion to).

Philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom and seeking to understand the nature of knowledge, reality, and existence through **human theory and thinking** as opposed to faith in revelations from a prophet and commandments by God.

Let’s hold that thought as we look deeper into Zarathushtra’s teachings...

phi·los·o·phy | fə'lāsəfē |

noun (plural **philosophies**)

the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline. See also **natural philosophy**.

- a particular system of philosophical thought: *Schopenhauer's philosophy*.
- the study of the theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience: **the philosophy of science**.
- a theory or attitude held by a person or organization that acts as a guiding principle for behavior: *don't expect anything and you won't be disappointed, that's my philosophy*.

Recap: the Framework of the Gathas

To recap from [Part I An Overview of Mazdayasna](#), the Gathas teach us a practical, spiritual philosophy focused on improving existence through self-realization and realization of the Divine:

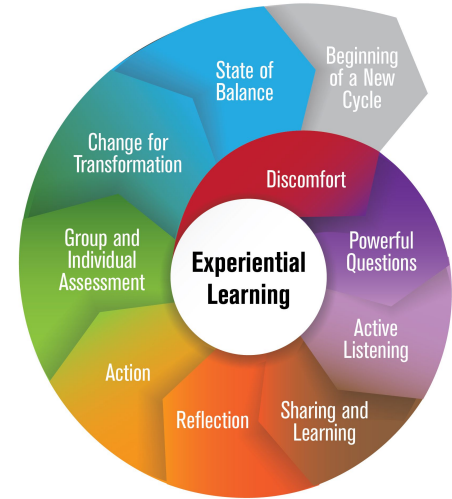
1. **Goodness & Truth** - the Divine is wholly good, beneficial, our friend and ally -- Asha is the ideal, perfect, and wholly good order of existence, the way existence should be
2. **Free Will & Growth** - human beings are free to choose, learn from our choices, and adjust -- we can grow and realize 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!



Recap: a Learning Cycle for our lives

More simply, Zarathushtra teaches us a system, a way of looking at our reality, a way of life that is timeless. I see it as basically a learning cycle for our growth. 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 (Asha)**, for what is right and good, in all aspects of our reality, and for all existence
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."



The Search for Truth (Asha) is incremental, dynamic, and ever fresh

How does the Gathas teach a ever fresh way of life? By encouraging us to always seek Asha, what is correct, true, and righteous, for all existence. Asha is the foundational concept of Mazdayasna and was the focus of [Part II Asha and the Search for Truth](#).

Asha (Truth) is what we seek and the path to Wisdom. To be aligned with Truth, we must consult the most current understanding of our day and age: to find what is true and right in both existences of mind and matter for all the living.

Contrary to other religions which may look for people to accept dogma and static commandments as “tests of faith” - **the life of a Zoroastrian is to always question, reflect, learn and grow!** It’s to continuously work together to realize Asha.

Asha is incremental, the more we seek and align ourselves with it, the more we understand and realize it. This ongoing search means our understanding of Asha will evolve via our experience based growth. This keeps Mazdayasna ever fresh and current!



Truth is our teacher, it is the path to Wisdom

Asha literally means “what fits” as in the correct truth of how things fit and are ordered in a system, it is often translated as Truth/Righteousness but it’s important to note that no one word fully encompasses it’s meaning. Zarathushtra emphasized the search for Truth (Asha) as our ongoing objective and the path to realize the Divine.

*“I shall take the awakened soul to the exalted abode with the help of the Good Mind;
Knowing the blissful rewards of the Wise Lord for righteous deeds;
As long as I have power and am able,
I shall teach all to seek for Truth and Right.”*

-Gathas Y28.4

Zarathushtra also tells us he was instructed in Asha (Truth/Righteousness). This means learning from Truth like a teacher. So here the ongoing search for Truth, the desire to comprehend it, is emphasized again as the path to self-realization and the path to Wisdom.

*“And when **Thou didst instruct me in Righteousness,**
Thy command to go forth and proclaim Thy revelation was not unheeded;
Even before the sublime enlightenment coming with Thy messenger Sraosha,
Bringing us the destiny of our appropriate rewards.”*

-Gathas Y43.12



How do we learn from Truth?

In the Gathas*, Zarathushtra speaks of Truth (Asha) in the existences of both mind and matter.

There is no divide between science and spirituality. **Physical truths and spiritual truths are part of a seamless whole -- the true, correct, order of existence, Asha.**

In the Search to realize Asha, we continuously look to grow towards the following:

In the physical world - the existence of matter

We learn from studying how the universe is ordered, science, and factual truths:

- Asha is truth - what is accurate about our physical existence, the laws that govern the universe - physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and factual truths
- Asha is harmony, balance, evolving, refreshing, the universal law of physical existence

In the spiritual or abstract world - existence of mind/spirit/heart

We learn from free will & cause and effect - evolving through our experiences:

- Asha is righteousness, it's the right, beneficial thing to do for of all existence
- Asha is the best good, loving, beneficent, the way of wisdom & the way to Wisdom
- Asha is happiness, generating peace and tranquility, how to perfect all existence
- Asha is just - not punitively but through experiential learning resulting in our growth
- Asha is the opposite of fury, cruelty, violence, destruction, deceit



* For references to specific Gathas verses and a much deeper analysis, please see Dina G. McIntyre's outstanding work on Asha at <https://gathasofzarathushtra.com/1-4-truth-asha/>

Asha includes caring for our environment and healing all of existence

The Search for Truth includes modern issues such as caring for our environment. How? The Gathas teaches us to heal, improve, bring joy to all existence - not just humankind.

*"In humble adoration, with hands outstretched I pray to Thee, O Mazda!
First of all, through Thy Holy spirit vouchsafe to me
All righteousness of action, all wisdom of the Good Mind,
That I may thereby bring **joy to the Soul of Creation.**"*

-Gathas Y28.1

*"So may we be like those making the **world progress** toward perfection;
May Mazda and the Divine Spirits help us and guide our efforts through Truth;
For a thinking man is where Wisdom is at home."*

-Gathas Y30.9

*"Make known to me, O Mazda, the best teachings and actions,
Actuated by the Good Mind, and inspired by Truth,
As I express my aspiration in my songs of veneration for Thee.
By Thy Sovereign Authority do Thou **regenerate this existence**,
through Thy gracious Will, O Ahura!"*

-Gathas Y34.15



Asha includes social justice and fighting oppression in all its forms

Healing all existence includes all of humankind, not just those similar to us or in power. We are to fight oppression and injustice in all its forms similar to how Zarathushtra bravely stood out against the established tyrannies of his time.

*“Thy message shall undo the work of the evil-doers,
No more shall the wicked Kavis [rulers], and the Karpans [priests],
rule over the lives of the righteous.
But the **good shall be escorted through Perfection and Immortality**
To the Realm of the Best Mental Existence!”*
-Gathas Y32.15

*“He who is most good to the righteous, Be he a noble, or a peasant, or a dependent,
He who **zealously makes the good living creation flourish**,
He shall come to dwell with Truth in the realm of the Good Mind.”*
-Gathas Y33.3

*“...What is the source of the Best Existence?
How shall one who seeks it, receive the blessed recompense?
Surely such a holy one through Righteousness [Asha],
Is a **healer of existence, beneficent unto all, a genuine friend**, O Mazda?”*
-Gathas Y44.2



We must help others and work together to realize Asha completely

The Gathas teach us that we are all connected and we cannot realize Asha by only helping ourselves. We must help others to progress, via their own free will, spreading radiant happiness and making us whole and complete (Haurvatat).

*“Happiness be the lot of him who **works for the happiness of others.***

May the Lord grant him health and endurance.

For the effort to uphold Truth,

I beseech these very gifts from Thee!

Mayest Thou, through Armaity, the Spirit of Rightmindedness,

Bless me with the perfection of a life guided by the Good Mind!”

Gathas Y43.1

*He who **teaches others the righteous path of truth and happiness.***

Both in the material world and also the spiritual,

The path leading to Thy abode, O Ahura;

He attains an end better than good.

A generous and enlightened helper, a faithful worthy of Thee, is he, O Mazda.”

-Gathas Y43.3



Improving the world is the work of each one of us, we are our own saviors!

We can see how Zarathushtra clearly teaches a practical, spiritual philosophy focused on improving our existence right here and now.

We are not waiting on an external savior or seeking a transactional promise e.g. obey X commandments and you will be rewarded or punished. But there is clearly injustice and suffering in this world, so who will improve it?

The Gathas tells us that **we are all responsible for improving this existence**. We partner with Wisdom to heal all of existence and thus also heal ourselves.

We do this by comprehending Asha, Righteousness and Truth for all existence, embodying it individually and collectively, until we realize it completely, becoming one with the Divine and part of the “endless lights”.

*“Such are the saviors [saoshyants] of the earth,
Who, inspired by the Good Mind, cause betterment,
By actions in tune with the laws of Truth and Justice [Asha].
They are indeed appointed by Thee to dispel violence, O Mazda!”*

-Gathas Y48.12



A Modern and Living Philosophy

In conclusion, I think the Gathas teaches us a practical, spiritual philosophy focused on improving our everyday lives through self-realization and realization of the Divine.

The Avesta may contain dogmatic lists of dos and don'ts, purification rites, and other religious requirements similar to other religions. But we must place them in the appropriate context: these were the interpretations of Sassanid priests, 2,000+ years after Zarathushtra when Avestan wasn't well understood.

We have a much better understanding of both the language and the relevant context of the Gathas today. I look to the Gathas as the core of Mazdayasna, if there are outer layers of traditions (new or old) that are compatible with this core then that is wonderful - if not, each individual is free to accept or reject them.

The beauty of Mazdayasna is that there is no dogma, no orthodoxy.

It is a system and way of life that **enables us to grow ourselves and improve all existence, realizing Truth and subsequently the Divine.** Thus, I see this framework as more of a modern and living philosophy for everyday life - ever fresh.



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

United in Strength and Righteousness to Improve our Existence

Let's close with a fitting prayer and mantra about how we must work together and unite in strength and righteousness [Asha] to improve our existence:

*"May we be joined in strength,
may we stand united through righteousness,
may we join hands in doing more good deeds,
may we unite with good people,
may we be far from wrong and wrong-doers,
may we be joined hand-in-hand with all the faithful
and all the good people of the world."*

-Hamazoor Beem prayer



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>
- All Gathas verses listed are from [D.I. Irani's translation](#) unless otherwise noted

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

August 2022

Discussion