

DG McIntyre - For Love of Wisdom

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Next to the gift of love, one of the most precious gifts that we can enjoy is the gift of ideas. In response to your kind invitation, I would like to share with you a few interesting ideas of the prophet, Zarathushtra. He lived more than 3,000 years ago, but we are fortunate to have his own words, which have come down to us in an ancient language, in the form of 17 poems, cryptic, multi-dimensional, full of puzzles, and not always easy to read. Today, we call these poems, the Gathas of Zarathushtra. Because of differences in translating and interpreting the ancient language in which they are written, opinions sometimes differ on what Zarathushtra said or meant. I find this diversity somehow fitting, in studying the words of a prophet who taught that we should think for ourselves.

People sometimes debate whether Zarathushtra's teachings are a philosophy or a religion. Philosophy means "love of wisdom". The ancient name for Zarathushtra's religion is "mazdayasna" meaning "the worship of wisdom" which in Zarathushtra's view means to serve it with love (Y51.22). And his understanding of God is wisdom personified. He calls Him Ahura Mazda which means Lord Wisdom,¹ or the Wise Lord.

To Zarathushtra, religion is an on-going quest for truth. Truth for truth's own sake. He says:

"... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth. Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire...good thinking..."² Y28.4-5.

In these verses, the translator has chosen the word "truth" as the object of the quest. However, the word in the Gathic language, is *asha*, and it means more than truth. *Asha* has been variously translated as "truth" "righteousness" "goodness", "justice" benevolence, generosity, loving-kindness, as well as "the natural order of things". You well may wonder: how could one word possibly have so many different meanings. The answer lies in understanding Zarathushtra's world view.

To Zarathushtra, the material or physical world, and the mental or spiritual world, in our present reality at least, are two complementary parts of one overall design. The material or physical world is neither illusory, nor is it intrinsically evil, to be rejected. The exquisite order of the universe (of which even disorder is a part) – from the awesome splendor of galaxies, to the workings of a tiny cell – are all as much a celebration of the divine as a loving heart or a truthful mind. With this understanding of Zarathushtra's world view, we can begin to understand the meaning of *asha* – the object of our quest.

Asha literally means "what fits". "What fits" in the material or physical world, is what is accurate – truth, the laws that govern the universe – laws of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy – the natural order of things. In the abstract world of ideas, "what fits" is what is correct – truth, what's right. In the Gathas, what is right, includes such notions as goodness, justice, compassion, generosity, solicitude, beneficence, loving-kindness – all these are a part of what is fitting, the ideal order of things in the world of mind and spirit. So in essence, *asha* means the true or ideal order of things in all aspects of our present reality – physical and abstract. And that is the object of our quest – to search for the truth, the true order of things, in the worlds of both mind and matter – scientific truth, philosophic truth, social truth, spiritual truth, and of course, what is true or right in our relationships – with each other, with our environment, and with other life forms. As you can see, there is no one word in translation, that comprehends the full meaning of *asha*. Many translators have selected "truth" as the nearest word for *asha*. But I ask that you think of the full scope of *asha* ("what fits" in the worlds of mind and matter) when you hear the word "truth" in connection with Zarathushtra's thought.

To Zarathushtra, truth, *asha* is an attribute of the divine. Religion is an on-going quest for truth. And the weapon of choice in this quest, is another divine attribute – a good mind, or good thinking – what Zarathushtra calls *vohu mano* – reason and intelligence committed to goodness.

Searching for and comprehending truth is a necessary first step. But it is not enough. We also have to bring the truth to life, make it a part of our reality, experience it, with our choices in thought, word and action.

Zarathushtra teaches, that over and over in the events and circumstances of our lives we are confronted by choices.

With each choice, we either advance the truth, or retard it. Even failing to choose, is a choice. Zarathushtra suggests how we should make our choices. He says that:

1. we should listen to what others have to say,
2. we should reflect on the matter with a clear mind, and independent judgment – each person for himself, and then
3. we should make choices that are “beneficent” – generous, good, truthful. He says:

“Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision.....” Y30.2.

And in the verse that follows, he concludes:

“..... the beneficent have correctly chosen...” Y30.3.

Zarathushtra does not command us to obey him without question. Even when he prays for guidance from God himself, it is through good thinking that he asks God to instruct him. He says:

“...instruct through good thinking (the course) of my direction, in order to be the charioteer of my will and my tongue.” Y50.6.

Like truth, good thinking is also a divine faculty. Good thinking is how the Wise Lord communicates with us. According to Zarathushtra’s teaching, it is only when we think for ourselves, make choices, make mistakes, and learn from our mistakes, that we evolve to higher levels of understanding, that we get closer to comprehending the truth.

Of course, with the freedom to choose comes the responsibility of living with the consequences of our choices. In Zarathushtra’s teachings, there is no hell in the conventional sense. He teaches that the way our reality is ordered, *asha*, includes that perfect justice which generates the law of consequences – that we reap what we sow, that the good and the bad we do comes back to us. However, it is important to understand that the purpose of the law of consequences is not punishment. It’s purpose is enlightenment. Given the ability to reason (*vohu mano*) when we experience the “bad” consequences of our wrongful choices, it increases our understanding and compassion, so that we do not make such choices again, not out of fear of punishment, but because our new understanding informs our preferences – we choose not to make such choices again, because that is not the way we want things to be. In short, in addressing the problem of evil, Zarathushtra’s thought does not focus on punishment or forgiveness. There is no notion of damnation in his thought. Rather, Zarathushtra’s focus is on eliminating evil by changing minds from within, as part of an evolutionary process. The factors that bring about such change are: (1) the ability to understand, (2) listening to others (acquired knowledge), (3) innate wisdom, (the wisdom that is within us), (4) the educational effects of the law of consequences, and (5) one other very important factor – mutual, loving help, between man and God, and man and man. The Gathas are full of interesting paradoxes, and one of these paradoxes is that on the one hand, Zarathushtra’s teaching is founded on individual choice, individual judgment, and individual responsibility. On the other hand, he also teaches that none of us can make it on our own. Each of us, to make it, must both give and receive help.

Of course, not all of the hardships and difficulties which we experience are the consequences of past wrongful conduct. If life is a spiritual evolution towards completeness and perfection, as Zarathushtra teaches, then it stands to reason that we will have to experience many different experiences for this learning and perfecting process to be realized. The difficulties we experience – earned or unearned – are the refiner’s fire, without which pure gold would not be possible.

Let us consider for a moment, Zarathushtra’s idea of the divine. Today, we are used to thinking in terms of a benevolent monotheism. But things were very different in his time. He lived in an age when men worshipped many gods – some of whom he describes as “fierce” (Y34.5) and “hateful” (Y32.3). We know from the Gathas, that the priests and princes of his day, joined forces in a corrupt and oppressive alliance, so that the people of his time were caught in the grip of a secular authority that exerted its control in part through fear of the cruelty of dominant local gods. Zarathushtra viewed this pantheon of fierce and cruel local gods who were oppressing his people, and, in his quest for truth, using his own reason and intelligence, he concluded that they were not worthy of worship.

He demoted them from “godhood”. He reasoned that only a Being of pure goodness, loving, truthful, intelligent, could be considered divine, worthy of worship – a significant step in man’s search for God.

It is also significant that although Zarathushtra describes truth and good thinking as attributes of the divine, he also sees them in man (albeit in a less than perfect condition), indicating man’s capacity for attaining the divine.

His formula for attaining the divine is simple but profound. According to him, the objective, and the path to the objective are the same. We attain the divine by worshipping the Wise Lord with his own divine characteristics. We attain the divine faculty of truth by questing for it with good thinking. We attain the divine faculty of good thinking by questing for, and comprehending the truth. A complementary and incremental process. Referring to the Wise Lord and His divine characteristics, as “all of you”, Zarathushtra says of this form of worship:

“...I shall always worship all of you, Wise Lord, with truth [asha] and the very best thinking, and with their rule...”
Y50.4

“I ... shall serve all of you, Wise Lord, with good thinking...” Y28.2.

And most interesting is his idea that we perform these acts of worship in the temple of life, with our thoughts, words and actions. Just as an artist uses paints to express his ideas, so too our material world is the matrix or medium through which we express and bring to life the divine faculties of truth and good thinking.

In short, Zarathushtra teaches us to worship the Wise Lord by infusing His divine qualities into every aspect of our material reality, with each thought, word and action – at home, on the job, in academia, in government, in our treatment of each other, in our treatment of our environment, in our treatment of other life forms. Under his formula for worship, because we 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. An interesting paradox – revealing the interdependence of all things, and the necessity of loving, caring for, and nurturing, each part of this inter-connected whole.

So to Zarathushtra, the purpose of life is twofold: It is to grow spiritually ourselves, creating and re-creating with our choices, the Wise Lord’s divine values, until we attain them completely, thereby perfecting ourselves and becoming one with the Divine, and in the process, perfecting our world.

This brings us to Zarathushtra’s idea of heaven. To Zarathushtra, heaven is a state of being that is achieved when we have attained completely the Wise Lord’s divine attributes, and we become pure goodness, wisdom personified. In the Gathas, one of the metaphors for the Wise Lord and His divine attributes is light, or glory. So the more we evolve spiritually, the more light-filled we become, and the more light-filled we make our world. In the later literature, there is a very beautiful term for “heaven”. It is called the “Endless Lights.”

In conclusion, Zarathushtra’s religion is a system, a way of looking at our reality, a way of life that is timeless. I hope you will forgive an oversimplification. 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.

End Notes:

1. Thieme, Reflections on the Vocabulary of Zarathuŝtra’s Gathas, Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium 1993, p. 201 (WZO 1998).
2. As translated by Professor Insler in The Gathas of Zarathushtra, (Brill 1975). All references and quotations from the Gathas in this paper are to that Insler translation, unless otherwise indicated, although Professor Insler may or may not agree with the inferences I draw from his translation. Round brackets appearing in a quotation are in the original. Square brackets indicate an insertion by me. Such insertions are provided by way of explanation. A string of dots in a quotation indicates a deletion from the original. Often a verse

contains many strands of thought. Deleting from a quotation those strands of thought that are not relevant to the discussion at hand enables us to focus on the strand of thought under discussion