

D G Mcintyre - How Do We Worship, How Do We Pray

It is impossible to study the Gathas without being struck by the intensity of Zarathushtra's relationship with Ahura Mazda. A relationship that he expresses through direct communication, in the language of his day. The Gathas are full of many types of prayer. Zarathushtra does not dictate specific prayers that must be recited. Instead, he talks to Ahura Mazda, one on one, about anything and everything. He talks to Mazda about his hunger for knowledge: He asks who fixed

"...the course of the sun and of the stars? Through whom does the moon wax (now), wane later? These things indeed and others, I wish to know Wise One." Y44.3.¹

He talks to God about his mistreatment at the hands of others, his grief, his rejection by the community, his anxieties about whether he will ever be able to persuade others of the validity of his message, and about other things that concern him. And he prays for guidance.

"...do Thou, Wise Lord, instruct me...through the eloquence befitting Thy spirit..." Y28.11.

But even when asking for guidance from Mazda, he does not surrender his ability to think for himself. He asks for guidance through good thinking. He prays:

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

The same holds true of Zarathushtra's idea of obedience. In the later literature, it is said that when a soul departs this life, it is sraosha, which means "listening" or "obedience," that brings the soul to God after death. I think this is a metaphoric way of saying that listening to, and following Zarathushtra's teachings, is what brings us to God. But to Zarathushtra, the concept of sraosha does not mean blind obedience. It is a thinking obedience. He says in the Gathas:

"... As world-healer, promise us a judge, [or teacher] and let **obedience** to him come **through good thinking**, to him whomsoever Thou dost wish him to be, Wise One." Y44.16.

The Gathas also contain prayers of intercession. Some of us are inclined to regard such prayers with disfavor. I fully agree that if we regard God primarily as an insurance policy, or as a supplier of goods and services, that is a somewhat limited vision of the relationship. However, I am not persuaded that it is either wrong or futile to ask God for help. He is so generous, that even when we pray to Him in foolish ways, asking for foolish things, I think He uses the opportunity to help us acquire understanding. I don't think any prayer, however foolish, is ever wasted. Zarathushtra expresses the belief that God always answers – one way or another – if a prayer has two ingredients – 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." Y28.10.

Notice, he does not say that we will get what we ask for. He says that the request will not be left wanting. He frequently asks for help for himself and for others, but as usual, with a difference. Let me show you a few examples, and see if you can pick up on the difference: In Yasna 28, verse 8, he says:

"Thee.....do I lovingly entreat for the best for Frashaoshtra...and for me...and (for those others)...the best for a whole life time of good thinking." Y28.8.

What is he asking, for Frashaoshtra and himself and others? In Yasna 46, after complaining about being hounded from his family and his 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 !" Y46.2.

Again, what kind of support is he asking his Friend for? In Yasna 49, he says:

"Throughout my lifetime I have been condemned as the greatest defiler, I who try to satisfy the poorly protected (creatures) with truth, Wise One.come to me and give support to me. Through good thinking, find a means of destruction of this." Y49.1.

What is the weapon with which he asks God to destroy the persecution to which he is being subjected? In Yasna 34 verse 7, he says:

Wise One, where are those sincere ones who, through their possession of good thinking, make even immoral decrees and painful legacies disappear? I know of none other than you. Therefore protect us in accord with truth [asha]. Y34.7.

His reference to immoral decrees and painful legacies almost sounds as though he is talking about what is going on in our community today, doesn't it. But again, what is the protection he requests against these immoral decrees and painful legacies? In each instance, it is some variation of asha and vohu mano which are the sought-for solution. True, there are instances where Zarathushtra, being practical, also asks for the material wherewithal to enable him to advance his vision (Y43.1, Y43.12). And faced with relentless persecution, there are times when he thinks with some satisfaction about the educational effects of the law of consequences. (Y43.4, Y47.6). But the primary solution is always asha and vohu mano and the spirit of goodness which begets them.

As Zarathushtra wins more people over to his vision, his prayers reflect an intense desire to spread the Word. He says:

"At my insistence...the family, the community together with the clan, entreated for the grace of Him, the Wise Lord, (saying:) 'Let us be Thy messengers,' " Y32.1.

"...We shall be Thy envoys forever." Y49.8.

Notice, it is the whole community who entreats to be Ahura Mazda's messengers. What therefore could Zarathushtra have meant by this prayer, other than to have the whole community spread his vision beyond its confines to all the living. Indeed, he makes it clear that the lineage he cares most about is our lineage with truth and Ahura Mazda's other aspects. He says:

"...Any such person of [aramaiti] is of the (same) good lineage with truth and all those (other forces) existing under Thy rule, Lord." Y49.5

We can see from the above illustrations, that Zarathushtra prays by talking with Ahura Mazda in a very intense and personal way – asking Him questions, complaining to Him, confiding in Him, expressing his concerns to Him, asking for guidance, and asking for help – with a difference.

These are examples of what I call "asking prayers". Most of us, however, are aware through experience, that it is impossible to teach without learning. It is impossible to give without receiving. And a similar paradox exists in prayer. It is impossible to experience Ahura Mazda's generosity in response to prayer, without being generous in return. In addition to the "asking prayers", the Gathas reveal what I call "giving prayers".

We see many instances in which Zarathushtra, with a full heart, sings the praises of Ahura Mazda. This is a conventional form of "giving prayers". Less conventional is the fact that he also gives praise, esteem and reverence to Ahura Mazda's divine aspects, sometimes jointly with Ahura Mazda, and sometimes separately, by themselves. For example, he says:

"...let us reverently give an offering to Thee, Lord, and to truth...." Y34.3.

"...As long as I shall be able, I shall respect that truth is to have a gift of reverence." Y43.9.

But most unconventional of all is the fact that, in an age when men worshipped gods by slaughtering animals in stone temples, Zarathushtra introduces the idea of worshipping God with thoughts, words and actions in the temple of life. He advances the unique idea that even the divine aspects of Ahura Mazda, such as truth and good thinking, to be worth anything to us, cannot exist in a vacuum. They must be expressed, given life, in the material reality of thoughts, words and actions. For example, he says in the beautiful Yasna 30 verse 7:

"But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth [asha] and (our) enduring [aramaiti] gave body and breath (to it). ..." Y30.7

We see the same idea expressed in Yasna 43, where he says:

“... May truth be embodied and strong with breath...” Y43.16.

In short, he teaches us to worship God by infusing God’s divine qualities into every aspect of our material reality, into each thought, word and action – in our families, in our friendships, at home, in the business world, in academia, in government, in the practice of our professions, in our treatment of the environment. A “living” worship, in every sense of the word. Most religious traditions teach that to advance ourselves spiritually, we must reject the material. Zarathushtra’s teaching is so uniquely and beautifully different. Under his formula for worship, it is impossible to advance ourselves, spiritually, without at the same time advancing our material world. A neat paradox. So a life well lived, is the loveliest prayer of all. The ultimate “giving prayer”. There are many verses in the Gathas which reflect this idea of worship. Here are a few examples.

“...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.

“...the beneficent man...[h]e serves truth [asha] during his rule, with good word and good action...” Y31.22.

“...fame is to serve Thee and the truth, Wise One, under Thy rule.” Y32.6.

“I shall try to glorify Him...with prayers of [aramaiti]...”Y45.10.

Of course, it is one thing to articulate the concept of this unique form of worship. It is another thing entirely to implement it. What, in a given situation, is consistent with asha? What is not? The answers are seldom clear cut. But then, that is part of the fun of being a Zarathushti, is it not? Figuring out these questions for ourselves, case by case, with vohu mano? Will we make mistakes? Inevitably. But, with vohu mano, we learn from our mistakes – a necessary part of the growth process.

We sometimes question whether asha is the same in the “mino” world as in the “getig” world; whether there is a difference between asha and asha vahista; whether asha is subjective or objective. I don’t think there are different kinds of asha. I don’t think asha is subjective. I think asha is asha – always perfect, the ideal order of things in the worlds of mind as well as matter. Asha is “what fits” in the ideal sense. It is only our attempts at understanding it that are subjective, that vary from culture to culture, or from one century to another. But as we evolve or grow, that perception becomes more accurate until finally, the ideal, and our understanding of it, is the same. Until then, figuring out how to bring asha to life with our thoughts, words and actions is sometimes fun, and sometimes painful, but always the ultimate creative challenge.

There’s an old song called “The Lonesome Train.” It was sung many years ago by Paul Robeson, and was about the train that carried Abraham Lincoln back to Illinois after he had been assassinated. In one part of the song, Robeson sings:

“Freedom’s a thing that has no ending. It needs to be cared for. It needs defending. It’s a great big job for many hands, carrying freedom ‘cross the lands.”

All of the values that we cherish – the freedom to speak, to think for ourselves, to make choices, values such as justice, generosity, goodness, lovingkindness, truth, what’s right – all of these values are implicit in the notion of asha. These are not things that we can take for granted. These are not things that are handed to us automatically, free of commitment. These are values that we have to create, and re-create, give life to, give substance to, over and over, with our choices in thought, word and action, as long as we have life. Because if we don’t, we lose them. They cease to have reality in our world and in our beings. It’s that simple.

I would like to close with a blessing. I originally crafted this blessing for my children’s wedding, but I think, with some changes, it is a good blessing in honor of our newest members, who have just had their navjotes performed, and also for the rest of us:

May Ahura Mazda bless us,
May we bless each other,
May we bless the world in which we live.

May He be generous with us,
May we be generous with each other,
May we be generous with all living things.

May He sweeten our lives,
May we sweeten each other's lives,
May we sweeten the lives of all whom we touch.

May He instruct through good thinking
The course of our direction,
May He give us enduring strength to uphold what's true and right.

And, for our newest members:

May each of you be an ornament of the Zarathushti Din,
To which you now belong.

Welcome!

1. 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.