

## Exploring the Gathas:

**Creation — Amesha Spentas**

**Good and Evil — Reward and Retribution**

— Ervad Behram M. Panthaki

*Ushta-no zato Athrava, yo Spitamo Zarathushthro*

*Fortunate are we that the Teacher was born, Spitama Zarathushtra*

*(Yasna xii - 94)*

### Introduction

Gatha is an Avesta word meaning 'a song, a hymn, a divine song.' As the name implies, the Gathas are the divine songs and are metrical chants of Zarathushtra himself. These are expressively stated to be five in number, and "of Zarathushtra Spitama" (Yasna 57.8). Each of the five Gathas consists of one to seven Haintis - Has - Sections/Chapters, grouped in the Gathas on the basis of their five different metres (3-5-4-3-4). The second to fifth Gathas are named after their respective opening words where as the first Gatha, the Ahunavaiti Gatha, is named after Yatha Ahu Vairyo [Ahuna Vairiya (Yasna 27.13)] which evidently had been counted as the beginning of the Gathas in an earlier compilation of the Yasna. Thus we have the following subdivision of the Gatha collection with their Avesta names, meaning, with corresponding numbers of the cantos of the Yasna:

1. Ahunavaiti (Divine Will) Yasna 28-34
2. Ushtavaiti (Bliss) Yasna 43-46
3. Spenta-Mainyu (Bountiful Wisdom) Yasna 47-50
4. Vohu-Khshathra (Beneficent authority) Yasna 51
5. Vahishtoishti (the highest Boon) Yasna 53

The Gathas must be judged by themselves and in the light of their own contents. The thought of the Gathas is really profound. The Gathas are spiritual in the fullest sense of the term. Therefore, it is essential to lift up their message to spiritual heights and never to understand them at the ordinary earthly level. Almost all the translations speak of 'cattle' and 'fodder' and 'pastures' as constituting the main theme of the Gathas. If the message of the Gathas deals only with these topics, then they are not worthy of being exalted to the rank of fundamental Scriptures of a great Religion.

The fundamental teachings of the Zoroastrian religion are included in the Gathas, viz. life after death, the law of reward and retribution, the dual principle of good and evil, monotheism, the law of Asha, crusade against evil, industrious living, etc. More profound themes like the origin of creations, power of mind giving life and vitality to the corporeal existence, perfection and immortality, the Beneficent Spirit of Ahura Mazda, mystic speeches, wisdom of good mind also occur in the Gathas.

In the Gathas we find only the main points of the teaching jotted down rather than a "connected" system of philosophy. Each verse contains one or two ideas expressed in terse and often highly poetic language. Each verse represents some idea but the connection between the verses themselves is often not expressed at all. Only long and patient thought and genuine involvement and inspiration, coupled with a life lived according to the teaching, would slowly bring out the connecting links. All one can do at present

is to take up the scattered hints from various verses of the Gathas and other Hymns and carry them forward to their logical conclusion.

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## Creation

Do thou O Mazda Ahura instruct me Thyself and  
Proclaim through Thy Spirit as through Thine-own mouth,  
Whence the Creation first came into being.  
(Yasna 28.11) (IJT)

This do I ask, Ahura, tell me true: .....  
Who was First Father of Eternal Law?  
Who laid down Paths for Sun and Stars?  
Who made the moon to wax and wane betimes?  
Whose might holds the Earth and Sky apart?  
Who keeps the Waters and Plants in Place?  
(Yasna 44.3-4) (IJT)

The Gathas are not very specific on the methodology of Creation of the universe or the earth nor on how mankind was created. They throw very limited light on the genesis. From various fragmentary evidence and scholarly intuitions we therefore have to create an imaginary re-constitution of the process and later see to what extent modern scientific research can support that theory.

According to Dr. M.N. Dhalla, the earlier gropings of Iranian thinkers seeking the origin of the universe seemed to have focussed on Zarvane Akarana (boundless Time) and Zarvane Daregho-Khuadhata (Time of long duration) as also Thwasha Khvadhata (sovereign space). These abstract ideas and concepts later became personified as deities, not unlike the Amesha Spentas and Yazatas, and even led to the creation of a sect of Zarvanas who subordinated Ahura Mazda to Zarvan as the prime Creator!

The California Zoroastrian Center interprets the Gathas as the universe is expanding, progressing, renewing and moving towards perfection. But according to later scriptures (post Gathic) and some modern 'scholars', there is the 'heptad' of six lesser divinities (Amesha Spentas) who assisted God in the task of Creation in the six (evolutionary) stages, starting from the sky, water, earth, plants, animals and mankind. This imaginary sequence of stages and timing was in course of history, soon attributed to each divinity, with the qualification of having created and presiding over its individual share of Creation.

It is said in Yasna 44.7 that Creation is a free act of the divine goodness of Ahura Mazda. He has created the universe through his wisdom and rules it through wisdom. In the beginning when He lived in his supreme self-sufficiency, he conceived the thought to clothe the heavenly realm with light (Yasna 31.7). He created light, and darkness was there, for darkness shadows light (Yasna 44.5). The joy giving cattle and this universe are His creations (44.6; 50.11). He upholds the earth and firmament from falling (Yasna 44.4). He made the moon wax and wane, and determined the path of the sun and stars (Yasna 44.3). He yoked swiftness to winds and clouds (Yasna 44.4). He it was who made morning, noon and night (Yasna 44.5). He created kine, waters and plants (Yasna 44.4; 48.6; 51.7). He created human beings and their spirits, breathed life in their bodies and endowed them with the freedom of will (Yasna 31.11; 46.6). He inspired love between the son and father (Yasna 44.7). He made sleep and wakefulness (Yasna 44.5). He is the beneficent dispenser of blessings to mankind (Yasna 28.5; 33.11; 48.3). Weal and woe are ordained by Him (Yasna 45.9)

The Gathas also indicate when the progress of Creation will stop; the evolution of the universe will have reached its destined goal; the cycle of the world will then be completed; and creation and life will end. (Yasna 43.5; 51.6). The world process will then come to its final consummation as ordained by Ahura Mazda at the beginning of Creation. It will have reached the desired ultimate perfection.

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## Amesha-Spentas

Who are seven of one thought, who are seven of one word,  
Who are seven of one deed; whose thought is the same,  
Whose word is the same, whose deed is the same: and  
Whose Father and Lord is the same - the Creator, Ahura Mazda.  
(Yasht, xiii, 23)

The word literally means the “Immortal Bountiful Ones” or “the Holy Immortals”. The six Holy Immortals represent the six principal aspects of the Divine Lord. Sometimes Ahura Himself is mentioned together with them and then They are spoken of together as the seven Holy Immortals. The Amesha Spentas work in cooperation in the Governance of the universe just as seven prismatic colors are different manifestations of the same white light, the seven Amesha Spentas are also different aspects of Ahura Mazda who is the creator of all. They can best be regarded as personification of virtues. It is rather remarkable that three out of the Six Holy Immortals should represent the masculine aspects of God and the other three the feminine aspect. This is but one of the many hints we get in Zarathushtra’s religion of the absolute equality of sexes.

The term Amesha Spenta does not occur in the Gathas; but Amesha Spentas are mentioned individually by name in the Gathas. They are also collectively mentioned in the Gathas as mazdaoscha ahuraongho ‘the lords of mazda’ (Yasna 30.9); as hazaoshaongho vispaongho ‘all of one accord’ (Yasna 51.20); and also as hudao ‘good-givers’ (Yasna 48.3). Though the Amesha Spentas are depicted as the spirits of light it is on the moral plane that their influence is strongly felt, especially in the Gathas. They may be construed as divine attributes in these devotional hymns. No truer and nobler idea of the power of God could one conceive than that of eternal divine attributes out of which emerge all that is good and beautiful in the universe. One attribute follows the other in proper sequence revealing the truth how the organizing of affairs in God’s universe is based on eternal principles.

In our religion the primary virtue is Righteousness, which is God’s established Order (Asha). The high concept of Asha, although it forms the core of Zarathushtra’s teaching, could not long continue at its high spiritual and intellectual level. The average human being needs something more tangible than this abstract idea of Asha, and so we find that gradually Asha gets a lower place in the Angel hierarchy, and the more easily understood Good Mind takes the position next to Ahura, which originally belonged to Asha. And because Asha was the most important part of the Prophet’s message, He came naturally to be associated with the outward symbol of His religion - Fire. So, very early we find Asha Vahishta (the highest or the best Asha) representing Fire, the symbol of Zoroastrian religion. The Prophet chose the Fire as His symbol, for it is the purest among God’s creations. It has besides two peculiarities, which can also be used to symbolize two important spiritual qualities. In the first place Fire has got the power of immediately transmuting everything it touches into a likeness of itself. And secondly, the flames of fire always tend upwards, and thus aptly symbolize our yearning for the Higher Life. And in the Sassanian times the name of the Holy Immortal - in the Pahlavi language, Ardibesht - is used for Fire, and He is regarded as the Lord of Fire.

As already hinted above, the first position in the Angel Hierarchy has been taken on later by Vohu Mano (Pahlavi Behmen) originally the second Holy Immortal. His name signifies good mind, whose gifts are

purity of mind, quality of virtue and complete impartiality i.e. all objects of the universe are loved alike and there is no particular attachment to anybody. In the Gathas too, Vohu Mano occupies a very high place. He and Asha stand on either side of Ahura Mazda. It is Vohu Mano who leads mankind up to Asha. A man who chooses not to tread the Path of Asha gets no help from Good Mind. "The gifts of Good Mind are for those who work for the Lord". He, in short, represents the highest mental purity that a human being is capable of achieving. Good Mind naturally implies loving kindness and goodwill towards all beings. This goodwill and love embraces not merely mankind but also our younger brethren of the animal creation. Kindness to animals, especially to those who are of use to man and help him forward in his progress and civilization, is a cardinal virtue enjoined in Zoroastrianism. All animal creation is under the special protection of Good Mind and cruelty to animals is a sin against Him. Quite logically therefore this Archangel is called "the Guardian of the animal creation".

Next is Vohu Khshathra (Shehrevan), represents the Perfect Strength, the Omnipotence and the Universal Sovereignty of the Lord. He too is nearly a pure abstraction in the Gathas. The man who obeys the Law of God obtains the Divine Power. We pray for this Divine Strength to help us further along the Path. In later times Shehrevan becomes the Lord of the Mineral Kingdom, the Guardian Angel of the metals and the precious things of the great earth. Probably another reason for investing Shehrevan with the guardianship of the metals lies in the fact that the possession of metals forms the outer sign of earthly sovereignty. The earthly lord should possess besides gold and silver also iron and steel and copper and bronze. The last four which supplied the weapons and the armor of the soldiers represent strength much more effectively than do the first two.

Spenta Armaiti (Spandarmad), Holy Devotion is the fourth of the Holy Immortals and the first on the feminine side. There seems to have been some sort of correspondence between these two groups, masculine and feminine, of the Holy Immortals, though this correspondence is not quite clearly brought out. Still Asha and Armaiti, who stand at the head of each group are clearly connected and have a certain number of features in common. She is as essential to the faithful as Asha is. Devotion is the first requisite for the human being, for it is devotion that sanctifies the heart. The devoted in heart alone can travel the Path in safety, and so Spenta Armaiti is to be the constant guide and friend of the Zoroastrian throughout his life. Armaiti has also been identified with Mother Earth who sustains and nourishes us all upon her bosom. We have our birth from her, we are nourished in life by her and after death we rest in her bosom again.

The twin Amesha Spentas, Haurvatat (Khordad) and Ameretat (Amerdad) stand for "Wholeness" and "Immortality". They are always spoken together in the Gathas. Haurvatat represents Spiritual Wholesomeness and Spiritual Health, in other words the Perfection of our Father in Heaven. Ameretat is the Immortality, the Freedom from Death which invariably accompanies Perfection. In the Gathas these two names occur but in few places. On the physical plane Haurvatat and Ameretat are the Guardians of the waters and of the vegetable kingdom respectively. They figuratively represent the ambrosial food of heaven and the resulting immortality. Their blessings to the worshipper take the shape of perfect physical health and endurance of the body, and hence their connection with the healing and health-giving waters and plants, which should in an ideal age form the only food of mankind.

The wonderful and poetic teaching about the Holy Immortals, through which Zarathushtra strives to give mankind some idea of the essential nature of the Supreme Power may be summed up thus: "Every human being must strive to understand the Eternal Law of Truth and Righteousness (Asha) and must try to realize it in his daily life. In order to do this he must cultivate Love - universal Love - (Vohu Mano) and realize it deep within his Inner Self. This Truth and Love thus realized must next be translated into Acts of Service (Kshathra). All through one must hold fast to firm unshaken Faith (Armaiti) - Faith in the essential divinity and goodness of all creation. And thus one attains to Perfection and Immortality (Haurvatat and Ameretat), and becomes perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect and conquers death."

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## Good and Evil

Yes, I shall speak of the two fundamental spirits of existence, of which the virtuous one would have thus spoken to the evil one: "neither our thoughts, nor teachings, nor intentions, neither our preference nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions, nor our souls are in accord". (Yasna 45.2) (S I)

Yes, there are two fundamental spirits, twins that are renowned to be in conflict. In thought and in words, in action, they are two: the good (Spenta Mainyu) and the bad (Angra Mainyu), and between these two, the beneficent have correctly chosen, not the malicious. (Yasna 30.3) (S I)

We are living in the world of contradictions. Life is conditioned by the two opposing forces - creative and destructive, or positive and negative, each resisting the other. The former is inherent in every form of life and works from within outwards and it is counteracted by the latter. Take an example of a seed. The force inherent in it makes it grow into a plant, but the force of resistance comes from without, from the opposition of heat and cold, wind and sun. Body, mind and soul have also to follow the same law of growth. All existence is thus, balanced between the twin forces - creative and destructive, or call them by whatever name you like.

On the moral plane our life is swayed by the forces of good and evil. No man can be totally good or totally bad. Every human being is a strange combination of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But the problem of evil has confounded the best of intellects. If God is universally acknowledged as good, wise, just, kind and merciful and also omnipotent, why does He permit evil to plague mankind? Zarathushtra has tried, in the Gathas, to solve this intriguing problem.

He has traced the origin of evil to one of the twin spirits who differ in thoughts, words and deeds one being better and the other evil. Further, it is said that the two spirits produced life (gamcha) and non-life (a-jyaitinamcha), (Yasna 30.3, 30.4). Confusion centers round the latter term. It is clear that any form of life or existence (gamcha) can be produced. But how can the same be said as to non-life or non-existence? How can it be produced? Hence the explanation seems to be that the term 'gamcha' refers to positive life-force, and 'a-jyaitinamcha' to negative force of decay and destruction, which acts against life. Again, it is said that out of these, the good-knowing chose truthfulness whereas the evil-knowing did not.

Zarathushtra explains the nature of the two Mainyus (mentalities), that the root cause of the universe appearing with mixed good and evil, is these Mainyus. They were created with a motive by Ahura Mazda and both were made very proficient in carrying out that motive, (even though ostensibly in opposite directions). Each is the enemy of the other and they never agree on anything. One of them (Spentisto) creates virtue, good and righteousness, maintains them and advances them. The other (Acisto), the most evil, creates all evil, vices and unholy policies. Former is the guide to the good path and latter to the evil path.

The Evil Spirit who disputes with the Holy Spirit is not given a proper name in the Gathas. Of the two primeval Spirits, the one who chose evil as his sphere of activity is given the epithet angra, meaning enemy or evil. Angra Mainyu this means the Enemy or the Evil Spirit (Yasna 45.2). In another place it is said why is a bad (angra) man not like unto Angra, 'The Evil One', referring evidently to Angra Mainyu, or the Evil Spirit (Yasna 44.12). The term angra is thus used more than once in the ordinary meaning 'evil' as a designation of wicked men (Yasna 43.15). He is given the epithet aka, 'bad' (Yasna 30.3). In one place he is given the name Aka Mainyu, 'the Bad Spirit' (Yasna 32.5). Yet in another instance he is termed dregvant, or the Wicked One (Yasna 30.5). In his thoughts, words, deeds, faith, conscience, soul

and everything else, he stands at the opposite pole to the Good Spirit (Yasna 45.2). He is himself evil in thought, word and deed (Yasna 30.3) and chose to do worst things (Yasna 30.5).

Some scholars misinterpret the two Mainyus as 'dualism' preached by Zarathushtra. The California Zoroastrian Center explains 'Spenta' means progressive (or incremental). 'Mainyu' is mentality (or spirit or mind). 'Spenta Mainyu' is thus progressive mentality. 'Angra' is evil (or hostile or retarding). 'Angra Mainyu' is therefore retarding mentality i.e. anti progressive. The term 'Angra Mainyu' is not even once mentioned in the Gathas where as 'Spenta Mainyu' is mentioned sixteen times. There is no mention at all of any struggle or battle with 'Angra Mainyu'. In Yasna 37.3 and 45.15 Ahura Mazda is actively continuing, promoting and advancing progress of the universe. He is Spento Temo i.e. most progressive.

Zarathushtra declares in Ha 33.9 that he now feels competent to continue discussions over the two Mainyus, as he is able to understand their rationale. They do this contradictory and conflicting work merely in obedience to the command of Mazda because if they do not work that way, the very motive of creating the universe would not be fulfilled. The original aim of both of them is to promote righteousness even though their approach may differ. Man has to be properly put through his trials (i.e. exposed to the forces of evil) so that what outwardly appears to be evil, is in the end only preparation (experience) for going on the true path of righteousness.

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## Reward and Retribution

He who continues causing pain to the righteous, his end is:  
Destruction in the future, long duration of darkness and  
Badly flowing speech, pursuing unworthy ends...  
The result of his own actions  
(Yasna 31.20) (AFK)

I recognize Thee as the First at the birth of life;  
for thou hast ordained that all acts and all words  
Shall bear fruit - evil to evil and good blessings to the good  
(Yasna 43.5) (IJT)

So now you understand the two modes of life, both of which Mazda has ordained;  
One going to the good path and the other going to the evil way:  
And so there is long enduring harm for the perverse mind,  
But there is strength for the righteous,  
So that there shall be final emancipation (eternal bliss) through these (right modes)  
(Yasna 30.11) (AFK)

The Zoroastrian religion repeatedly emphasizes the law of cause and effect, action and reaction. Every event has a cause, every action has its reaction - these are fundamental principles which underline all the activities of the material world. Turn the pages of history and you will find a definite rhythm in the rise and fall of empires, in the growth and decline of nations, in the vicissitudes of fortune through which great civilizations of the world passed - all due to the unchangeable law of cause and effect.

Also, events in a man's life are based on the immutable law of cause and effect. What we experience today is the result of what we did yesterday, and tomorrow will be the consequence of today. Every little

good or bad deed of ours will definitely bear its influence on us, some time or the other. We are however, concerned more with the present which will shape our future life.

Zarathushtra has stressed this fundamental principle time and again in the Gathas. The Prophet addresses his audience thus, "Do you learn these doctrines - of happiness and suffering which the Omniscient gave to mankind, whereby there will be injury for a long time to the wicked and benefit to the holy, so indeed, there will be bliss unto them (Yasna 30.11). Through Asha and (the test of ) Fire, will Ahura Mazda give His final award, unto the good and evil (Yasna 31.3, 19) (MND). Through Khshatra, He apportions the destinies, Unto the good and evil, according to their deeds (Yasna 45.7) (MND).

It is said that on the dawn of the fourth day after death the souls of the righteous and the wicked cross over to the Bridge of Selection (Chinvato Peretus) and there the intellect and the soul (Baodha Urvan) are solicited to account for their actions performed in the material world. Hence, man's future state depends solely on his own actions in accordance with the unchangeable law of cause and effect. Whatever action a man performs, it reacts on him in some way or the other. Happiness or misery is the result our own thoughts, words and deeds which determine our so called heaven or hell.

It is sometimes argued that the wicked more often enjoy all the benefits of material life, whereas the good suffer in spite of their rectitude. Is this according to the law of cause and effect? We must note particularly in this regard that enjoying material benefits is not the final goal of human soul which is potentially divine, but spiritual development. Man has evolved through the ages and has to make an upward progress towards the advanced spiritual state. Every little act of wickedness, every sin, retards his progress and is balanced off by the dimming of the lustre of the soul according to the law of cause and effect. Material benefits or gains have no effect on the spiritual development of soul, because everything material is transitory. The Zoroastrian religion exhorts man to perform meritorious deeds in the material world for the redemption of his soul. No material benefits should be acquired at the cost of one's soul.

## **Conclusion**

The Gathas of Zarathushtra are admittedly the very foundations of our Faith. A few topics from the Gathas which we discussed today show that the Gathas embody extremely high ethical and moral precepts. But one finds that these renderings somehow lack the inspiration that should form their chief characteristics. One of the reasons could be that the translators, profound scholars and excellent philologists though they are, tend to have a western bias. Consciously or sub-consciously they cannot help feeling that any Message given so long before the advent of their faith and in far off Asiatic land, must necessarily be on a lower plane than that of their own Faith and their own Ideals. They really wonder how such high moral teaching should have been given at that remote period. Even though they admit and admire the sublimity of the teaching of the Gathas, they derive no inspiration from them. Their translations evoke admiration and wonder in our minds but they fail to inspire the reader.

The task must now fall to us Zoroastrians, to supply this much needed inspiration. So far Parsi scholars have been content to be led by our western 'gurus' and accept all that they have said. However, we possess what western scholars do not have-a living ardent faith in the Message of Zarathushtra. To us the Gathas are not mere interesting documents of Ancient Iran, but the eternal fountains of Spiritual Life. and, our faith, should make all the difference.

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