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Zarathustra's Essential Teachings, and Their Transformation Over the Ages

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Part One: Zarathustra's Essential Teachings

Introduction

I was raised in a traditional religious environment. The smell of *sukhar*-loban (sandalwood and incense) and chants of satum prayers at dawn and nyashes and yashts in daytime, wafted daily in my home. As in ancient Zoroastrian times, a glowing coal hearth -- representing the light of Ahura Mazda's wisdom and creation -- was reserved in our kitchen for prayers. During my exam days, it blazed with the *sukhar* I piled on it, while praying loudly for Ahura Mazda's and the Yazats' boon of doing well in them. Since childhood, I was taken to fire temples, jashans, muktads, obsequies and various religious ceremonies. That ours is a strictly monotheistic faith, born between 1700-1500 BC, based on continuing struggle between forces of good and evil and exclusive to those born into it, were drummed into me.

In early adulthood, I mused over how strict monotheism could be compatible with: the worship of Ahura Mazda and at the same time, of a divine pantheon of Amesha Spentas and Yazats (the archangels and angels in other faiths); an ongoing struggle between two forces, one of good and one of evil; the belief that Ahura Mazda and Ahriman -- an evil spirit -- were co-equals; man (1) receiving guidance from a supernatural fravashi, and not from Ahura Mazda in a faith its Prophet named Daena Vanghui (religion of good conscience).

Such casual thoughts were replaced by distinct unease when work took me to lands touched by Zoroastrianism -- from China to Central Asia, Turkey to Greece, and Egypt to the Middle East. I saw evidence that people of many ethnicities had long practiced it. In Xian (in China), I visited a mosque having clear traces of originally being a fire temple and a tomb of a Zoroastrian Chinese wife of a Chinese lord. Izedi Kurds in Iraq, who claimed to be Zoroastrians, took me to their fire temple (in a cave) vaguely resembling ours. Behistun's rock relief carvings in Iran and statues in ancient fire temples in Armenia, made me wonder why an unseeable Creator and yazats were depicted like idols. I stared dumb-founded at rock relief carvings of our Asho Farohar, but with a

circle instead of a human face, atop a 2200 BC temple in Egypt, and those with a human face on 900 BC temples of the polytheistic Assyrians in Iraq. Gothas (statues of five-legged winged bulls a human face and a crown) guarding entrances to our fire temples, lay scattered in Mosul and Baghdad Museum as sacred Assyrian relics. These are examples.

How could I then reconcile them with traditional religious beliefs ingrained in me from childhood? Or, those beliefs -- which included revering Ahura Mazda as well as primordial forces and divinities -- with Zarathustra's revolutionary teachings (2) predicated on the omnipotence of one ever-existent invisible transcendental power of immeasurable wisdom and intellect who created the universe and all in it? Or, elaborate priest-performed rites, rituals and ceremonies other than socio-religious ones like navjots, weddings, jashans and obsequies, with his teaching that man's path towards Ahura Mazda lay in venerating Him through personal prayers, simple personal rituals to reinforce devotion, and living by the faith's basic principles by using the key of good words, thoughts and deeds? Or, by so doing, man can perfect his urwan and the world, and earn afterlife in heaven? Or, Zarathustra offered his faith to all who might choose it?

To resolve my growing discomfort, I ventured on the journey of studying our faith in some depth. I tried to understand what Zarathustra really taught, the allegorical meanings in his words, and how and when they got transformed to what is now practiced.

As I probed, I was astonished that no godheads, primordial forces or divinities had place in Zarathustra's teachings and in fact, he denounced them. Yet, they are integral to today's Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. As my knowledge deepened, I was asked to chair or participate in scholarly discussions of the faith. That put me in contact with renowned scholars. Some, like Dasturji Minocherhomji, Farhang Mehr, Ali Jafarey and Stanley Insler, even befriended me. We explored various aspects of the faith. Some of their explanations, e.g. about the forces of good and evil as moral vs. cosmic dualism, forced me to think deeper to find more satisfying answers.

I am sharing what I found, only because I believe that many Zoroastrians may also want to ponder over information that is not easily available to them. Part I of this article gives in simple terms, the essence of Zarathustra's real teachings. Part II in the next Hamazor, explores the magnitude of their transformation over the ages. There are probably some errors in my findings. But hopefully, the essential thrust is in the right direction.

His Essential Real Teachings

Ahura Mazda

Zarathustra gave a double name to the omnipotent power creating the universe -- "Ahura Mazda". Ahura means Lord of Life and Mazda, Creator of Matter or simply, the "Wise Lord". He called the teachings, revealed to him by Ahura Mazda for the benefit of all mankind, **Daena Vanghui**.

Creation

Eons ago in the Spiritual Universe (Menog), Ahura Mazda drew up a Divine Plan to create a Material Universe (Getik). It was to be governed by His immutable laws of nature, with their actions and consequences (i.e., Asha or Absolute Truth).

Zarathustra speaks lyrically in his divine songs, the Gathas, about the physical and moral aspects of creation (e.g., Has. 30 and 44), but casts little light on the methodology of creation. He talks (Ha. 31.7) of streaming “lights from far-away heavens” (suggesting universe’s birth in a cosmic “big bang” that occurred some 14 billion years ago?), and a universe that is progressing, expanding, renewing and unfolding in accordance with Ahura Mazda’s Divine Plan until it will reach ultimate Perfection (Ha. 34.7, 43.5, 51.6). A part of that Plan was the world’s progressive Perfection in moral and ethical terms, through the active participation of the righteous human mind.

The Prophet taught that Ahura Mazda created the universe and everything in it, through His Spenta Mainyu (Creative Mentality) Mentality that is innate within Him (Ha. 44.7, 51.7). He does not mention help from any pre-Zarathustrian divinity, supernatural or primordial being. Indeed, he repeatedly denounces them as non-existent and false. Neither does he mention Amesha Spentas, Yazats or fravashis, all of whom are so integral to the beliefs and rituals of Zoroastrianism today.

Twin Mentalities – The First Step in Creating the Material Universe

The choice between good and wickedness (called “evil” only by later day Zoroastrians) or truth and deceit, constitutes the bedrock of Zarathustra’s ethical and moral teachings. What necessitates these choices, is explained through his percept of the Twin Mentalities (ta mainyus). “Mazda did create” them (Ha. 30.1) “at Creation’s dawn” (Has. 30.4, 45.2), as His first step in creating the Material Universe. He elaborated (Ha. 30.4): “As twin co-workers, they reveal themselves. Yet, in each thought, word and deed, these two are n’er agreed. One’s Good (Vayo), the other Bad (Akem)... “ (Has. 30.3, 45.2). And “When together did they foregather at Creation’s early dawn, Life (**Gaem**) did one make, and the other made Non-Life (**Ajyaitim**). And thus, Creation’s purpose is achieved. Dark is the mind of those that cling to the false, but brightly shines the Mind that holds to truth”.

Many scholars regard this as a moral or cosmic choice between good and wickedness or truth and deceit. But Dr. Irach Taraporewala has, to my mind, correctly interpreted that the essential difference between the two “is not so much as between ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’, as between the “positive and negative” in everything in creation (Divine Songs of Zarathustra, p.141). In other words, Zarathustra explained in allegorical terms that Ahura Mazda’s first act of creation was to set up two opposing aspects, or poles, in order to hold the Material Universe and everything in it together and maintain their progress thereafter.

Let us think this through.

Earth and heavenly bodies rotate on their axes and orbit in place in the vastness of space, only because their positive and negative magnetic poles create gravity. Matter is held together by positively and negatively charged atoms, particles and ions. Birth of most living things, requires

two distinctly opposite sexes. Every moral and ethical matter has contradictory dimensions or aspects, of good and bad. It is because man was created with an inborn capacity for good and wickedness, that he was also given a Mind that is free to choose between allying himself with the essence of good or bad. He also pays for those choices in afterlife, in either the “Abode of Song and Light” or its contradiction, the “Abode of Woe and Misery”. By designing opposing poles or aspects, He also created contradictory conditions of life and death and of salvation and damnation. They permeate everything in nature and cut across all modes of existence and dimensions of life.

As Taraporewala further explains (ibid, p. 137), the percept of the Twin Mentalities as the first step in the creation process, however “underwent a strange transformation later. . . . From being a creation of Ahura Mazda, the Bad (Akem) has become the rival and almost the co-equal of God”. This transformation, which took place centuries after Zarathustra, “was undoubtedly due to the influence of the Judaic idea of Satan”.

Evil

Zoroastrians today believe that their faith propounds an eternal struggle between the primordial forces of Good and Evil, between which they must choose. But was that Zarathustra’s original teaching?

As the eminent Zoroastrian priest-scholar Dasturji Dhalla notes (History of Zoroastrianism, p. 89), the Prophet gave no proper name to evil, nor specify its origin. And nowhere does he mention a primordial or personified evil spirit who initiates or spreads evil, or persuades men to commit it. In his teachings, he only uses words like Dregvant (Wicked One), Aka Mana (Bad Spirit) and Achista Mana (Wicked Spirit), with spirit meaning nature and not some supernatural spirit. The opposite of Ahura Mazda’s abstract Attribute of Asha (Truth), he calls Druj -- which translates as Wickedness, not Evil. Druj was dropped as Asha’s opposite centuries after, when later scriptures replaced it with Angre Mainyu, the primordial and personified Evil.

As Taraporewala reminds us (ibid, pp. 500-502), Zarathustra used words like angra, angro and anro in only three places (Has. 43.10, 44.12, 45.2). But none mean Evil or Evil spirit. They mean: (a) **doer of wickedness (angra)**, a person with an inborn wicked nature, who therefore generates cruelty, deceit, fury, greed, wars and the like which assail or embroil other men; (b) **wicked one (angro)**, a person who becomes wicked through the wrong choices he makes; and (c) **victim of wickedness (anro)**, a person forced into wickedness by the wicked environment around him. These usages suggest that wickedness has no substance on its own. Rather, it is man who gives it substance and makes it a reality, when he chooses to use his inborn capacity for wickedness instead of that for good. The key to the destruction of wickedness, therefore also lies in man’s hands, by making a choice to ally with the essence of good instead of wickedness.

By doing so, man can contribute to the moral and ethical perfection of the world. Because, when he sheds his propensity to be wicked or choose wickedness, he gradually contributes to his urwan’s perfection. When he does that, he also makes a positive impact on events surrounding him, his family, society and country. He thus progressively contributes to making the world around him more morally and ethically perfect.

The “Support System”

Ahura Mazda created man as His helper (Astis) (Ha.31.22) and friend (Urvar) (Ha.45.11) who would make the world morally and ethically perfect by choosing to perfect himself (Ha.31.11). To cope with that responsibility, and also for the fate of his urwan in afterlife, Ahura Mazda endowed man with the following “support system”.

- (i) a destructible body (**Tanu**) and an indestructible eternal soul (**Urwan**);
- (ii) a **Daena**, a faculty to receive Ahura Mazda’s guidance throughout life about what the righteous choices might be (voice of conscience in modern terminology);
- (iii) a capacity to receive that guidance through **Serosha**, His Divine Messenger Mentality;
- (iv) a Mind (Mano) that is free to accept or reject Daena’s guidance; and
- (v) six abstract **Qualities**, akin to Ahura Mazda’s six perfect Attributes innate within Him (Spentas), which man can make increasingly Spenta-like when he uses his Mano to choose whether to contribute to his urwan’s and the world’s perfection.

The linkage between the availability of such a support system and the freedom given to man whether to opt to avail of it or not -- thus reaping its consequences in his afterlife, is **a teaching unique to Zoroastrianism**. It goes beyond the popular belief that man can go to heaven simply by worshipping the Creator through constant personal prayers and/or practice of religiosity. **It implies living his earthly life by the faith’s basic teachings.**

Let us now understand the meaning of these six abstract Attributes and Qualities:

Ahura Mazda’s Divine Attributes	Man’s Qualities
<p>Asha (Male Gender) Absolute Truth or Righteousness Embodies: comprehension of the immutable Laws of Nature, whose acts and consequences govern everything in the universe process.</p>	<p>Asha Absolute Truth or Righteousness Capacity: to live righteously in accordance with those laws and thus help the process of perfection. Asha's opposite is not Evil, it is Drug -- Lies or Wickedness, or Dragvartim -- Untruth)</p>
<p>Vohu Mano (Male Gender) Good Mind/Divine Love Embodies: good mind (the means), good thinking (the process) and good though (result); thus, a Good Mind comprehending Truth and Love</p>	<p>Vohu Mano Good Mind/Love Capacity: to choose Good and Love, that encompasses all. (Vohu Mano’s opposite is not Evil Mind: it is Aka Mana – Bad Mind Or Achista Mana – Worst Mind</p>

<p>Armaiti (Female Gender) Divine Service/Devotion Embodies: unswerving devotion, service and loyalty to Truth, to make it a reality through righteous thought, word and action</p>	<p>Armaiti Service/Devotion Capacity: to serve all with devotion, thus bringing substance in thoughts, words and actions to Truth. Armaiti's opposite is Taromaiti)</p>
<p>Khshathra (male gender) Divine Energy/Power Embodies: Creator's energy/power to advance Truth and Good in the universe</p>	<p>Khshathra Human Energy/Power Capacity: human energy/power to serve mankind, by bringing Truth, Love and Service to fruition</p>
<p>Haurvatat (female gender) Perfection Embodies: Ahura Mazda's perfection</p>	<p>Haurvatat Perfection Capacity: to perfect one's urwan by living righteously and giving Love and Service to all in earthly life</p>
<p>Ameratat (Female Gender) Immortality Embodies: Ahura Mazda's "non-deathness", His Immortality</p>	<p>Ameratat Immortality Capacity: to achieve immortality for one's urwan by following Good Thinking, Truth and Service in life</p>

After-Life

When man's body dies, his urwan crosses **Cinvat Bridge**. This allegorical "Bridge of the Judge" signifies its passage from Getik to Menog, the material to the spiritual world (Ha. 46.10, 46.11, & 51.13). The Judge at the Bridge is Ahura Mazda Himself (Ha. 46.17). He separates a follower of Truth from that of Untruth in earthly life. It is unclear what the Prophet prescribed as death ceremonies (obsequies) to be done by priests. They are meant to comfort the relatives of the deceased and his urwan as it awaits Ahura Mazda's judgment. But they cannot sway it. It will be based only on life the deceased led on earth.

The ultimate reward for a man who followed Truth and used his Qualities to perfect his urwan progressively, is its absorption in Ahura Mazda's emanation. Zarathustra refers to it allegorically

as living eternally in His Abode of Song and Light, **Garō Damane** (Ha. 45.8, 50.4, 51.15). For a man who followed Untruth and did not use his Qualities, it is eternal life in His Abode of Woe and Misery, **Druj Damane** (Ha. 46.11, 49.11, 51.14). These “Abodes” are therefore not physical heavens or hells, promised by later prophets.

Zarathustra speaks of only these two Abodes. He does not mention any intermediate one for urwans who followed Truth and Untruth in an equal measure in earthly life. While perfection in one lifespan seems difficult to achieve, the Prophet does not mention reincarnation, except in Ha 49.11. But its scholarly interpretation is controversial.

Zarathustra’s Guidance for Implementing These Teachings

Understanding Zarathustra’s real basic teachings is one thing. How to implement them is another. Fortunately, they do provide guidance (3) on how man can achieve the goal of perfecting his urwan and contributing to the world’s gradual moral and ethical perfection.

As we understood in the preceding paragraphs, man is born with Qualities akin to Ahura Mazda’s abstract Attributes, as well as with an inborn capacity to generate Wickedness. However, he can evolve from this mix, by choosing paths which can help his urwan attain a “Spenta way of being” (Ha. 47.1) and thus, Immortality in his afterlife.

How can man achieve that? By venerating Ahura Mazda and His Attributes through personal prayers, simple personal rituals that reinforce his devotion, and living according to the faith’s basic principles. The “keys” for living in that manner, are good thoughts, words and deeds although Zoroastrians mistakenly believe them to be the faith’s basic principles. When man pursues them consistently, his Qualities progressively begin to personify Ahura Mazda’s Attributes more fully (Ha. 28.2, 33.8, 34.1, 45.10, 47.1, 50.4).

What does such veneration achieve? Besides enabling man to grow spiritually through deliberate choice, it also fulfills three other purposes of his earthly life, namely, to: (i) help defeat Wickedness which he often brings to life by letting his free Mind ignore his Daena’s guidance to choose Truth instead; (ii) contribute to making the world ethically and morally more perfect, by progressively renovating his urwan; and (iii) help realize this objective which is Ahura Mazda’s very purpose for creating him.

Man’s reward is that as his Qualities gradually strengthen, his urwan advances towards Perfection and Immortality (Ha. 28.10, 31.21, 33.13, 43.10, 45.4). The other is that this development positively influences not his urwan alone, but also advances his family, society and country and thus the world, towards moral and ethical perfection.

Why, and how, does that happen? Because man’s Qualities are both, what generate the reward and the reward itself, the result is an incremental process towards their Perfection. For example, pursuit of Good Thinking strengthens Good Thinking within man (Ha.28.10, 33.13, 34.21). Pursuit of Truth, strengthens Truth within him (Ha. 31.21). Thus, more he venerates Ahura Mazda and His Attributes as guided by his Daena, his understanding of Good Thinking, Truth

and Service becomes keener, and he can more fully hone the Qualities of his urwan and advance it towards Immortality in afterlife (Ha. 45,4).

What then are the consequences of wrongful thought, word or action? In the short-run, it may change a man for the worst. But in Zarathustra's unique paradigm, in the longer-run, worship and veneration of Ahura Mazda and His Attributes will help man begin the process of defeating his inborn capacity for Wickedness.

What is that paradigm? Zarathustra taught that Ahura Mazda's way of defeating Wickedness is not through fear of punishment. That merely suppresses Wickedness, not prevent, defeat, or eliminate it. The right way is to get man to gradually shed his Mind's inborn preference towards Wickedness and instead use the faith's three basic keys to a point where he just does not want to be wicked. While that reinforces his preference for a beneficial way of life, his Wickedness is likely to still lurk within him and hurt him. It is only when he decides that he does not want to be hurt by Wickedness of others, will he realize that it is also not the right way for him to be, or act, towards them.

Through a long process of making choices and experiencing their positive or negative consequences, preferences of most men begin to change. They begin to perceive Wickedness' adverse consequences, the harm it does to them and the benefits of choosing otherwise. Self-realization eventually dawns that it is just not the right way. Their Minds then invariably begin to follow their Daenas' guidance to choose Truth, not Wickedness, in every step of life. The Prophet calls this process **"the refiner's fire"** (Ha. 31.9, 47.6, 51.9). In other words, by experiencing the consequences of Wickedness on himself, comprehension grows within man that it is just not the right path. Only that of Asha, is.

To put it another way, **Ahura Mazda's justice is predicated on enlightenment.** For example, Has. 41 through 44 talk of changing the "minds of both factions", namely, of those who pursue Truth or Wickedness, so that both are enlightened into taking steps to perfect their urwans and the world. Ahura Mazda's goal is to enlighten man's free Mind so that it falls into a pattern of invariably choosing to live by the faith's basic principles.

What then is at the core of Zarathustra's teachings? Neither devout adoration and rote worship of Ahura Mazda, nor practice of religiosity and rites dedicated to Amesha Spentas or Yazats (both are not even mentioned in his teachings) to seek their boons, are what he teaches. Unfortunately, that is the common Zoroastrian way.

What lies at the core, is personal worship and simple rituals. These, and living according to the faith's basic teachings, can alone strengthen man's devotion to the Divine, offer him pathways to comprehend His Wisdom, Divinity and Perfection and enable him to become Ahura Mazda's effective helper, to thus fulfill the purpose of his creation.

To understand this simple yet profound message, consider these questions: What are the: (i) attributes of Wisdom which personify Ahura Mazda? (ii) Qualities given to man, that he is capable of honing? (iii) rewards for honing them? (iv) ways to defeat Wickedness, other than through punishment? (v) ways for a man to perfect himself and fulfill Ahura Mazda's purpose in

creating him? (vi) ways to reach Ahura Mazda and spend afterlife in His Abode of Song and Light by becoming part of His emanation?

The answer is the same to each question: (a) Truth (Asha); (b) its comprehension (Vohu Mano); (c) its devout pursuit in thought, word and act (Armaiti); (d) power and energy to achieve their realization (Khshathra); (e) attainment of Perfection (Hauvratat); and, (f) thereby, attainment of immortality (Ameretat).

REFERENCES:

1. "Man" or "Men" refer to both sexes.
2. Unless mentioned otherwise, this article reflects Zarathustra's teachings in his own words in the 17 Gathas (others have been lost) ascribed to him by scholars. These compositions were carried after his death by rote for some centuries, till writing was discovered. Each teaching is referenced to a relevant stanza (Ha.) of these Gathas, and based on translations by the pre-eminent Parsi scholar, Dr. Irach Taraporewala in "The Divine Songs of Zarathustra", Bombay, 1993, and the leading Gatha scholar, Stanley Insler in his "Gathas of Zarathustra", Leiden, 1975.
3. In making this analysis, the author is indebted to Dina McIntyre's insightful discussion of relevant issues in her "The Puzzle of the Amesha Spentas", Iran Zamin, Vol. 6. October 2006, from which he acknowledges quoting extensively.