



Zoroastrian Religion and Tradition

The 17 hymns in the Gathas are the only part of the Avesta (the primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism) composed by Zarathustra Spitama, prophet of the Zoroastrian religion. The Gathas, also known as Zarathustra's Manthras (instrument of thought, a thought provoker) ¹ are his teachings and are referred to as the core of the Zoroastrian religion.

Other sections of the Avesta are an important part of Zoroastrian and greater Iranian tradition as they depict a rich culture before and after Zarathustra. Written mainly by unknown individuals, some that are in tune with Zarathustra's teachings and many not, will be referred to as "Zoroastrian religious tradition".

Zoroastrian Religion:

Monotheistic Religion

Zoroastrians believe in one God.⁷ In the Gathas, Zarathushtra names God as Mazda, Mazda Ahura, Ahura, and one that today is more commonly known as Ahura Mazda. ^{2, 8} Ahura, meaning "The Being, The Essence" with a secondary meaning "Lord" and Mazda meaning "Supreme Wisdom" with a secondary meaning "The Wise" ¹ together mean "Supreme Wise Creator" or the "Lord Wisdom".

"Wise One, I realized you as the first and the latest, and as the patron of good mind, when I grasped you in my vision as the true creator of righteousness and the lord of life's actions." Gathas, Song 4.8 (Yasna 31.8) Translation by AA Jafarey

Dualism

Zoroastrians believe in a world created by Ahura Mazda. The good and the bad in the world are the mental states of mankind. The Good Mind, *Vohu Mana* will guide us in choosing the Righteous path (*Asha*) and progressive way of being or mentality, *Spenta Mainyu*; whereas a regressive mentality or a harmful way of being, *Angra Mainyu*, chooses the wrong path (*Druj*). ⁶

Through enlightenment and wisdom, we must try to help the wrongful to realize that the best existence is through Righteousness and through following the path of *Asha*. The beneficent, but not the maleficent, will correctly choose *Asha*. (*)

"In the beginning there were two primal spirits, Twins spontaneously active, These are the Good and the Evil, in thought, and in word, and in deed. Between these two, let the wise choose correctly. Be good, not base!" Gathas: Yasna 30-3 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani

Free will

The freedom to choose one's own destiny and path is fundamental in Zoroastrian belief. We are encouraged to listen to all viewpoints, think and evaluate with a clear mind to make the best and wisest decision. The destiny of an individual is shaped through the thoughts, words, and deeds that one chooses to follow. It is the law of action and reaction. We are our own savior or slayer. ^{2, 6}



“By Thy perfect Intelligence, O Mazda Thou didst first create us having bodies and spiritual consciences, And by Thy Thought gave ourselves the power of thought, word, and deed. Thus leaving us free to choose our faith at our own will.” Gathas: Yasna 31.11 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani

Using Reason in Zoroastrian Religion

Zoroastrians are encouraged to ask questions and seek answers. Resolution of the differences should be facilitated through reason rather than faith. Throughout the Gathas, Zarathushtra asks questions and seeks answers through Progressive Mentality of Good Mind, Righteousness, Serenity, and Wisdom. One of the things that makes the Zoroastrian religion timeless is an on-going and progressive search for Truth based on logical principals and a clear vision of humanity’s moral choices. ²

“Hear with your ears the Highest Truths I preach, and with illuminated minds weigh them with care, before you choose which of two Paths to tread, deciding man by man, each one for each...” Gathas: Yasna 30.2 Translation by Irach Taraporewala

Ferashem or Renewal (also known as Frashokereti)

Making the world fresh, renewed, and improved is of great importance in Zoroastrian religion. It is not enough to just have a good mind, but our good thoughts must be transformed into good deeds or actions for the progress and perfection of the living world.

“And may we be among those who make this life fresh! You, lords of wisdom, who bring happiness through righteousness, come, let us be single-minded in the realm of inner intellect.” Gathas: Song 3.9 (Yasna 30.9) Translation by AA Jafarey

Equality and Progression for All

Reaching a good dominion, a living world that is beneficial for everyone is achieved through a prosperous community with all members participating in the improvement. In the Zoroastrian religion all human beings regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, etc. are equal. The only thing that distinguishes one as more righteous than the other is one’s good deeds and benevolence.

“These words I speak to you, maidens, and newlywed husbands, and hope you will bear them in your minds carefully. Understand them deep within your souls and live always full of love with pure mind. Try to surpass each other in truth and righteousness. Thus each one of you shall, indeed, reap the reward of joy and happiness.” Gathas: Yasna 53.5 Translation by Mobed Firouz Azargoshab

Reward and Consequence

The righteous person is rewarded. In contrast there are consequences for wrongful action. Zarathushtra’s way of defeating evil is through changing minds, a long slow evolution of humanity’s mental state to a benevolent way of thinking and acting. The Zoroastrian religion gives us a system that enables evolution, and ongoing search for truth, so the wrongful can at any time join a benevolent way of life.



The reward of one who chooses the path of Asha (righteousness, truth, order) is Ushta (radiant happiness), Aramaiti (devotion, serenity, right mindedness), Vohu Khshathra (good state of being, benevolent power, good rule), Haurvatat (wholeness, completion, perfection), and ultimately Ameretat (immortality, deathlessness). The consequence of choosing the wrongful path is a life of chaos and woe. These are mental states which can lead to peace and happiness or chaos and sorrow.

In the Gathas, there is no specific mention of heaven or hell. After death the soul exists in a happy state for the righteous described in the Gathas as continued existence in the House of Song and for the wrongful a state of unhappiness described in the Gathas as existence in the House of Druj i.e., deceit or lie.⁶ In later tradition of Zoroastrianism these two states of mental existence are sometimes depicted as physical locations, giving the notion of heaven and hell.

“The follower of the righteous shall attain the Abode of Light; But he who deceived the good and the righteous, for him shall the future be long life of misery and darkness, woe and despair, O ye of evil lives! Your own deeds will lead you to this dark existence.” Gathas: Yasna 31.20 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani

Stewardship of nature and living things

Taking care of the environment by not polluting air, water, fire, and the earth is very important. Useless and sacrificial killing of animals is condemned and not acceptable.

“These evil-doers, who shall dwell in the abode of the Worst Mind, who yearn for ill-gotten gain, and seethe from discontent, Who wantonly destroy life; Away from Thy Prophet's message, They shall not behold the Vision of Truth.” Gathas 32.13 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani

Good Decision Making

Acting in haste or without careful thinking is discouraged. A wise person listens and uses his/her Good Mind to reason and act to make good decisions.

“Lord one who listens and realizes the Truth becomes a life-healing wise person. He controls his tongue to express the right words when he wills. He, O Wise One, through Your radiant light proves good to both parties.” Gathas: Song 4.19 (Yasna 31.19) Translation by AA Jafarey

Religion of Choice

The Zoroastrian religion is a religion of choice as Zarathushtra too chooses to follow the Progressive Mentality of Ahura Mazda.

Therefore, O Wise God, I, Zarathushtra choose for myself the very mentality of Yours which is the most progressive....” Song 8-16 (Yasna 43-16) Translation by AA Jafarey.

After the fall of the Sassanid Empire, Zoroastrians were prohibited to initiate anyone into their faith. This has set root in the Zoroastrian tradition. However today some Zoroastrians are in favor of



conversion while others are against it. The message of Zarathushtra as depicted in the Gathas is not for a group of people but for all mankind.⁸

“Hear with your ears the Highest Truths I preach, and with illuminated minds weigh them with care, before you choose which of two Paths to tread, deciding man by man, each one for each; before the great New Age is ushered in wake up, alert to spread Ahura’s word.”
Gathas: Yasna 30-2 Translated by Irach Taraporewala

Social Justice

Justice is for all, the righteous, the wrongful and in between.

“In accordance with the Primeval Laws of this existence, The Ratu (Judge) shall deal perfect justice to all; To the good who chose the Truth, To the evil who chose Falsehood, And to those in whom good and evil are mixed.” *Gathas: Yasna 33.1 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani*

Our Progression Towards Wholeness

Some of the key concepts in the Gathas are collectively called Amesha Spentas in later literature. These are attributes of Ahura Mazda, and mankind should live by them. We are Ahura Mazda’s co-workers and can attain Divine qualities, (*Vohu Manah* (good mind), *Asha* (order, precision, law of universe, righteousness, truth), *Aramaiti* (peace, serenity, devotion, rightmindedness), *Vohu Khshathra* (Good state of being, good dominion), *Haurvatat* (wholeness), all led by *Spenta Mainyu* (progressive mentality) towards *Ameretat* (Immortality or non-deathlessness).^{6, 8}

The focus of the teachings in the Gathas and the goal of every Zoroastrian is to live a life according to *Asha*, (Truth, Righteousness) to bring the world to perfection, in consonance with Truth with the comprehending power of Good Mind. Such a world will bring satisfaction to all the creation and will inaugurate the desired kingdom of *Khshathra Vairyra* where the ideal society would manifest peaceful social existence in which all interests would be harmonized and balanced in a just order, for that is the implication of *Asha*. This achievement depends on enlightened human thinking and right-minded human resolve. These are the religious goals according to the Gathas.¹²

“To him, who is Thy true friend in spirit and in action, O Mazda Ahura! To him shalt Thou give the perfection of integrity and immortality; To him shalt Thou give perpetual communion with Truth and the Holy Dominion, And to him shalt Thou give the sustaining power of the Good Mind.” *Gathas: Yasna 31-21 Translation by Dinshaw J. Irani*

Zarathushtra Upholder of Righteousness and Truth

Zarathushtra was in tune with Ahura Mazda (God). Zarathushtra was a seeker and upholder of Truth and Righteousness. He prays and seeks guidance from Ahura Mazda who is a kind creator and friend.⁶

“Now as a dedication, I, Zarathushtra offer to the Wise One the very life-breath of myself and the first fruits of my good mind, deeds and words, gained through righteousness, with my ear to the divine voice; in fact, my whole strength.” *Gathas: Song 6.14 (Yasna 33.14) Translation by AA Jafarey*



Zoroastrian Tradition

Fravahar a Symbol of Progression

The stone carving relief of a sun winged disc with a male figure at the center, found at Persepolis, the palace of the Achaemenid kings (550 BCE- 330 BCE) in Pars, Iran is the most famous pre-Islamic symbol which has come to be called the Fravahar, a symbol of Zoroastrian religion. Most scholars including Dr. Eruch J.S. Taraporewala, Dr. A. Shapur Shahbazi, and Prof. Mary Boyce are among those who believe that Fravahar represents *Khvarenah* (Persian *farr*, Old Persian *farna*, Middle Persian *khvareh*, and Avestan *khvarenah*) meaning Royal Glory. The Royal Glory or Farr is continuously mentioned in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi as the Royal Grace or the Divine Grace. It is what legitimizes a king's rule. Once the king is just, righteous, and progressive he possesses the Royal Farr but when the king abuses his power and deviates from the path of Asha the Royal Farr would leave him and his ruling days would be numbered. This is not limited to a king, as individuals, we can possess Divine Glory through our benevolent actions and deeds. Today, each part of Fravahar has been associated with a meaning, which is a more modern notion. The essence of its meaning today is the upward flight, ever progressive mentality, good thoughts, words, and deeds in following the path of Asha. (5)

Fravashi

The term Fravashi is sometimes confused with the term Fravahar. While the Fravahar is a symbol as explained above, Fravashi is considered to be the pure spiritual idea of each thing or being that Ahura Mazda creates. The Fravashi represents the way Ahura Mazda would have created the universe if there were no evil. The Fravashi of each person is pure and cannot be corrupted. The Fravashi guides the Soul to be pure like itself. It is a bit of Ahura Mazda in every part of Ahura Mazda's creation (not only humans) that guides creation towards perfection.

Fire as a Symbol

Zoroastrians are expected to respect, take care, and not pollute natural elements specially fire, water, air, and earth. Taking care of the environment is a part of Zoroastrian tradition and religion. Zoroastrians pray in front of fire (or any source of light) because fire symbolizes light, warmth, and enlightenment. In addition, for some Zoroastrians, fire is a symbol of God's light, and for others a means of connecting and transpiring to God through the divine essence of God in fire. (***) Some Zoroastrians through prayer and others through peaceful reflection in front of fire, connect with Ahura Mazda.

Death and Burial

After death, specific rituals and prayers are performed to help the passage of the soul into the spiritual realm. The physical body, which is devoid of the soul, is then disposed of as quickly as possible in the best fashion of the time.

The specific passage of the soul into the afterlife is not mentioned in the Gathas but in other parts of the Avesta, written during the Sassanid Era (over 1,000 years after Zarathustra). The Gathas focus on a way of constructive life for the living.



Heaven and Hell

“House of Songs” for the righteous and “House of Druj (lie/chaos/deceit) for the wrongful is believed not to be physical places but a state of mind achieved through our choices and actions in our daily lives. There are Zoroastrians who believe heaven or hell is a state of mind achieved through our choices and actions in our daily lives. And there are many Zoroastrians who believe in an actual incorporeal existence after their corporeal life.

In later texts, such as Bundahishn, more elaborate descriptions of the passage of the soul in a good and bad state of being have been described. Similarly, the two mentalities, 1) *Spenta Mainyu* (progressive, bountiful, increase, growth mentality) ⁶ and 2) *Angra Mainyu* (regressive mentality) over time have wrongfully been imagined and translated as physical entities. *Angra Mainyu* interpreted in Pahlavi language as *Ahriman* (evil being) is described incorrectly as the adversary against Ahura Mazda. ^{2, 6}

Celebrations

Jashans or Gahanbars

A life in accordance with Asha (Righteousness, Truth) leads to a joyful life and radiant happiness (Ushta). Celebrating life and bringing happiness into daily activities is important. According to the Zoroastrian calendar, each month and day has a name. When the name of the day and month are the same, the community gathers and celebrates. These are called parabs among Parsis and called monthly celebrations among Iranians. Mehregan is an example of a monthly celebration occurring in Fall on the day and month of Mehr. The importance of these traditional celebrations differs between the two communities. For example, Tirgan, and Mehregan are important celebrations for Iranian Zoroastrians, the Parab of Adar and the Parab of Avan (Adargan and Avangan) are important in the Parsi tradition. The Parab of Meher, Mehregan is also in the Parsi tradition.

Gahanbars are six seasonal celebrations celebrated for five days and are significant as they are dedicated to the six creations of Ahura Mazda (sky, water, earth, plants, animals, and humans). It is a time to thank Ahura Mazda for the good creations, giving back through donation, communal cooperation, and assistance, sharing food, and getting together as a community to celebrate our communal faith.

Navjote or Sedreh Pushi

The day of choosing, when an individual freely announces and chooses to follow the teachings of Zarathushtra, called Navjote for Parsis (Zoroastrians of India and Sedreh Pushi for Iranians, is highly regarded and celebrated. At the Navjote/Sedreh Pushi ceremony the initiate ceremoniously puts on a white cotton undershirt (Sedreh) which signifies purity and has a symbolic pocket to store the daily good deeds. This is accompanied by a sacred thread called the Kushti which is made from 72 threads representing the 72 chapters of the Yasna (the main Zoroastrian literature, which includes the Gathas). The Kushti is tied round the waist 3 times with 2 knots in the front and 2 knots at the back. Traditionally, Zoroastrians are expected to put on these symbols of the religion every day.



Other celebrations

Nowruz the beginning of the New Year is celebrated by all Zoroastrians and by many non-Zoroastrian communities that were once part of the Iranian Zoroastrian empires.

Yalda, and Sadeh, are among traditional celebrations that mostly Iranian Zoroastrians have kept.

Influence of Zoroastrian Religion and Tradition

The Persian Empires

Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid kings were Zoroastrian as evident by the fire stands and kings' scriptures of the time praising Ahura Mazda.⁹ Cyrus the Great is famous for his leadership and social justice as depicted in the Cyrus Cylinder (known as the first charter of human rights) which influenced the US founding fathers, the Declaration of Independence and Human Bill of Rights.⁵

Zarathushtra and the Greeks

Beginning in the 6th century BCE, after the Persian rule of Greece lasting for about 150 years, we see a sudden flourish of Greek philosophers attuning to reason and wisdom rather than Greek mythology. Heraclitus, being one of the influential people on Plato, had a clear connection with Persia. His writing on nature shows a clear connection to Zarathushtra's thoughts which had no precedent in Greek thought. In addition, his adaptation of fire as a symbol of cosmic order (Asha) is another parallel. Furthermore, he indicates dualism as the forward motion of evolutionary development.⁵ According to Porphyry and Iamblichus, many cultures influenced Pythagoras but none as great as the Magi.¹⁰

Zarathushtra's approach to ethics has marked him as the earliest philosopher (*Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn, 2016 Chronology).

Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism

The first major interchange between Judaism and Zoroastrianism is thought to have occurred with Cyrus' occupation of Babylon and freeing of the Jews and other enslaved people from slavery. Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1-3 named Cyrus as the Messiah, in addition to reference to other Persian emperors Darius and Xerxes for their benevolence.

Dr. Mary Boyce in her book *Zoroastrians*, 1979 writes, "So it was out of Judaism enriched by five centuries of contact with Zoroastrianism, that Christianity arose in the Parthian period, a new religion with roots thus in two ancient faiths, one Semitic, the other Persian. Doctrines taught perhaps a millennium and a half earlier by Zoroaster began in this way to reach fresh hearers."



History

Zarathushtra is mostly believed to have lived at the dawn of the Bronze Age about 1300-1700 BCE in the larger Iranian Plateau, probably close to the Oxus River.^{1,2} His tribe was descended from the people who migrated to the area from the land known as Airyana Vaeja.⁵ After Kavi Vishtaspa, ruler of one of the more prosperous of Iranian lands (mostly believed to be the area around Balkh) chose Zarathushtra's teachings as a way of life, his message slowly spread throughout neighboring lands through the words of disciples.^(1, 2, 8)

Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Achaemenid (559 BCE-334 BCE)¹¹, the Parthian (250 BCE- 227 CE) Empires¹¹, and the state religion during the Sassanid Empire (226 CE- 651 CE)¹¹.

After the invasion of Arabs and Islam into Persian lands and the continuous persecution of minorities including Zoroastrians through execution, social and economic pressures, some Zoroastrians fled to India (where they are known as Parsis). Parsis became respectable, members of the community in their new homeland. Those who stayed in Iran, took refuge in the desert lands of Yazd and Kerman.

During the late Qajar and Pahlavi Era, Iranian Zoroastrians started to gain some momentum, and many became productive and beneficial members of the country at large.

Today, Zoroastrians not only live in Iran and India but are spread all over the world specially in Tajikistan, Pakistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, United States of America, Australia, Canada, and Europe.

With a strong belief in education, righteousness, and progress, Zoroastrians are vital citizens of the global community.

For further information please contact FEZANA Religion Education Committee

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(*) Asha is translated as Ultimate Truth and Righteousness, the cosmic law and order in nature, precision. It is how the world ought to be in its ideal form. Doing the right thing at the right time with the right tools to gain the best result-*Gathas Our Guide* by Dr. AA Jafarey)

(**) mainly quoted from Mobed Zerkxis Z. Bhandara

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