

How Do We Worship, How Do We Pray.

By: Dina G. McIntyre.

It is impossible to study the Gathas without being struck by the intensity of Zarathushtra's relationship with the Divine -- a relationship that he expresses through direct communication, in the language of his day. Let us start with his notion of prayer.

Prayer.

We have already seen that in his thought, love is the foundation of prayer and worship.¹ But the Gathas are full of many types of prayer. Zarathushtra does not dictate any specific, set, prayers that must be recited by rote. Instead, he talks to the Wise Lord, one on one, about anything and everything.

He talks to Him 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 the Divine about many things that concern him:

About his mistreatment at the hands of others, "Yes, 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." Y49.1;

His grief, " ... I lament to Thee. Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend ..." Y46.2;

His rejection by his community, "To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan..." Y46.1;

His anxieties about whether he will ever be able to persuade others of the validity of his teachings "... How shall I bring to life that vision of mine,..." Y44.9; "... how shall I, with your accord, impassion your following,..." Y44.17; "... How might I deliver deceit into the hands of truth, ..." Y44.14;

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 the Wise Lord, 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." Y50.6.²

The Gathas also contain prayers of intercession.

Some of us are inclined to regard such prayers with disfavor. Now I fully agree that if we regard the Divine primarily as a supplier of goods and services, that is a somewhat limited vision of the relationship. However, I am not persuaded that in Zarathushtra's view, it is

either wrong or futile to ask the Wise One 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 the Divine 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 support, for protection, 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 Y28.8, he says: "Thee ... do I lovingly entreat for the best [vahishta-³] 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?

In Y46.2 after complaining about being driven away 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 powerful support is he asking his Friend for?

In Y34.7, 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 sounds like what sometimes happens in our own times. But again, what is it that makes these immoral and painful things disappear? And he asks the Wise One to protect him -- with what?

In Y49.12, he asks: "What help by truth hast Thou for Zarathushtra who calls? What help by good thinking hast Thou for me, ..." Y49.12. With what tools is he asking the Wise One to help him?

In each of these instances, it is some variation of truth (asha) and its comprehension good thinking (vohu manah) which are the sought-for solution. True, it is possible that Zarathushtra, being practical, also asks for the material wherewithal to enable him to advance his vision (although the opinions of translators differ here). But the things that generate the solution, the protection, the help, are always truth (asha) and its comprehension (vohu manah).

We can see from the above illustrations, that Zarathushtra prays by talking with the Wise Lord 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, protection, and support (through truth and good thinking).

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 the Wise Lord's generosity in response to prayer, without being generous in return. In addition to the 'asking prayers', the Gathas reveal a form of worship that I call 'giving prayers'.

The Worship of 'Giving' Prayers.

In the Gathas, the Wise Lord and His Divine characteristics, the amesha spenta, are objects of worship, reverence, praise, esteem and service.

But they also are the way to worship. Zarathushtra tells us to worship the Wise Lord with His own divine characteristics, the amesha spenta. There are many verses which attest to this form of worship.

"Yes, praising, I shall always worship ... you, Wise Lord, with truth and the very best thinking and with their rule..." Y50.4.⁴

"...Wise One, I shall serve... you... with truth... You, moreover, with the skillfulness of good thinking. Praising, I shall encounter you with such worship, Wise One, and with actions stemming from good thinking allied with truth..." Y50.8 – 9. Actions of good thinking and truth are the concept of aramaiti.

"I shall try to glorify Him for us with prayers of [aramaiti-], ..." Y45.10. Prayers of aramaiti are prayers of thoughts, words and actions which embody truth.

".....Your enduring worshipful offering has been established to be immortality and completeness." Y33.8.

In this last verse, Y33.8, the "worshipful offering" is completeness (haurvatat) and non-deathness (ameretat), which are the complete and undying attainment of truth. In other words, it is our own self realization -- the complete and undying attainment of truth -- which is the best worship offering we can give to the Wise Lord.

We also see this beautiful form of worship -- worshipping the Divine with its own characteristics, the amesha spenta, in the enigmatic Y51.22 where Zarathushtra says:

"I know in whose worship there exists for me the best
in accordance with truth.
It is the Wise Lord as well as
those who have existed and (still) exist
[i.e. the amesha spenta⁵]
Them all shall I worship with their own names
And I shall serve them with love." Y51.22.

How do we worship the amesha spenta "with their own names"?

We worship truth with truth -- by being truthful.

We worship good thinking with good thinking -- by using our minds to search for the truth, and understand it -- the factual truths of our universe, and also the truths of mind and spirit.

We worship aramaiti with aramaiti -- by bringing truth to life, giving it substance, with our thoughts, words and actions.

We worship good rule with good rule -- by using whatever power we have to perfect the amesha spenta in ourselves, and in our world.

We worship haurvatat / ameretat -- by attaining and personifying truth completely, perfectly (haurvatat), in an undying way (ameretat).

We worship a benevolent way of being (spenta mainyu) by being benevolent, beneficent -- good, generous, loving.

I love this form of worship. It warms the heart and delights the mind. To think that one's actions in the hustle and bustle of the 'real world' can be acts of worship if governed by truth and good thinking, gives meaning and beauty to what would otherwise be mundane acts.

In short, in an age when men worshipped gods by slaughtering animals (and possibly each other) in stone temples, Zarathushtra introduces the idea of worshipping the Divine with thoughts, words and actions in the temple of life -- the ultimate 'giving prayer'.

Implicit in this framework of worship is the idea that the good end can be reached only by like means. The adage 'The end justifies the means' is not a part of Zarathushtra's reality.

Implicit in this framework of worship is the idea of a balance of endeavor between the Divine and the human, required to bring about the desired end. What the Wise Lord requires of us, He delivers of Himself -- truth, its comprehension, its embodiment in thought, word and action, its good rule, its complete and undying attainment.

Implicit in this framework of worship is the unique idea that even such divine characteristics 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. "[But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth \[asha\] and ... enduring \[aramaiti\] gave body and breath \(to it\). ...](#)" Y30.7.

We see the same idea expressed in other verses: "[... May truth be embodied and strong with breath...](#)" Y43.16; "[...Through its actions \[aramaiti-\] gives substance to the truth...](#)" Y44.6.

In short, he teaches us to worship the Divine by infusing its 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, the material world is an indispensable medium, or matrix, through which we worship with thoughts, words and actions. A delightful paradox.

Under his formula for worship, because we worship with the material reality of thoughts, words and actions, it is impossible to advance ourselves, spiritually, without at the same time helping each other and our world.

So to Zarathushtra, the fragrance of a life well lived, is the incense of worship -- the loveliest prayer of all. The ultimate 'giving prayer'.

"I...shall serve ... you, Wise Lord, with good thinking..." Y28.2.

"...the beneficent man... He 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.

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 truth (asha-)? What is not? The answers are seldom clear cut. But then, that is part of the fun, is it not? Figuring out these questions for ourselves, case by case, with good thinking (vohu manah)? Will we make mistakes? Inevitably. But with good thinking we learn from our mistakes – a necessary part of the growth process.

Is there a difference between truth (asha-) and the 'best' truth (asha- vahishta-)? I do not think so. Part of the problem has arisen through the choice of translating vahishta as 'best'. But in English, 'best' has acquired a competitive meaning which is absent from the meaning of vahishta, which simply means 'most good' -- the superlative form of vohu 'good'. In using vahishta with truth, Zarathushtra is simply saying that the true order of things (asha) is the epitome of goodness -- the way we might describe the same person one time as 'beautiful' and at another time as the 'most beautiful'. The person is the same.

We sometimes question whether truth (asha) is subjective or objective; I don't think, in Zarathushtra's thought, truth (asha) is subjective. It is the true (correct) order of things in the existences of mind as well as matter. It is only our attempts at understanding this true (correct) order (asha) that are subjective, that vary from culture to culture, or from generation to generation. But as we grow in understanding, that perception becomes more accurate until finally, truth, and our understanding of it, is the same. Until then, figuring out how to bring truth (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, friendship, truth, what's right – all of these values are implicit in the notion of asha (the true order of things in the abstract existence). 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 general blessing for all of us, because it reminds us of an essential teaching of Zarathushtra. See if you can discover what that is:

May the Wise Lord 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.

Let each of us try to win the other with truth, goodness, all that is right, and we will all be winners.

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¹ See the piece of *Love in the Gathas*.

² The same holds true of 'obedience' sraosha, which literally means 'listening' and 'implementing'. In the Gathas, this is a thinking 'obedience', freely chosen. In the later texts, it is said that when a soul departs this life, it is the angel sraosha, who brings the soul to the Wise Lord after death. I think the 'angel' is an allegory. This is a poetic way of saying that listening to, and implementing, the path of truth (the path of the amesha spenta -- truth, its comprehension, its embodiment in thought word and action, its good rule, its complete and undying attainment), is what brings the soul to the Divine.

³ Vahishta is the superlative form of vohu 'good' so vahishta literally means 'most good'. It is not 'best' in a competitive sense.

⁴ See also "... One chooses that rule of good thinking allied with truth in order to serve (Him ...)" Y51.18; "... praising with truth Him who is beneficent through His [spenta- mainyu-] to those who exis ..." Y45.6.

⁵ Insler so interprets the words "those who have existed and (still) exist" which he footnotes as follows: "Namely, those who are immortal; specifically, the good and enduring values of the lord." Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (E. J. Brill 1975), *ibid.*, page 109, footnote 26, an interpretation that is corroborated in the later Yasna 70.1. "I will worship those who (are) the *Amesha Spentas* and I will approach them with love." Y70.1 as translated by Humbach in *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts*, Vol. 2, page 236.

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