

**A Friendly Universe.**

By

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Dear Friends,

I am indeed honored by your invitation to be with you today, and I thank you for having me.

When it comes to Zarathushtra's thought, we all are students. No one has all the answers. And integrity requires that a speaker disclose the perspective from which she speaks. The Gathas are believed by most scholars to be Zarathushtra's own words. And my understanding of our religion is based primarily on the Gathas, and the later texts to the extent that they are consistent with, or throw light on, the Gathas. The translation of the Gathas from which I will be quoting is that of Professor Insler of Yale University.<sup>1</sup> I try diligently to be objective in my Gathic studies, so that I can ascertain Zarathushtra's own thoughts as accurately as possible. However, to me, the value of his thoughts lies in the way they help me to make sense of my life, and relate to the Divine. So my perspective is a personal one, but based, I hope, on an objective understanding of Zarathushtra's teachings.

Is our universe a friendly place?

My journey in studying the Gathas has been full of piecemeal discoveries. Discoveries of individual units of jeweled thought that surprised and delighted my mind and refreshed my spirit. It is only very recently that these piecemeal discoveries of Zarathushtra's thought have coalesced into another surprising discovery -- the realization that according to Zarathushtra, our universe is a friendly place.

By "universe" I refer, not to inter-stellar and inter-galactic space, but to the universe of our lives -- that realm which encompasses our day to day existence. Just as each life is unique, so is the universe which surrounds and defines it. Although the concepts we discuss here today are a framework, a template, their application is unique to each of us. So, once again, what I say is necessarily something of limited perspective.

But even in the area of science, our knowledge always has been, and continues to be, limited, incomplete. If we do not think about our existence, based on the information available to us, just because our knowledge is limited, the search for truth would have no beginning or continuation. And this is precisely the approach that Zarathushtra himself takes.

His teachings do not give us fact-specific answers. They give us a framework to help us find our own answers. To Zarathushtra, "religion" involves an on-going quest, an on-going search for truth. He says:

". . . as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [asha]. Y28.4

"Truth [asha], shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire . . . good thinking . . ."Y28.5

We see that the object of this quest is asha. What is "asha"?

Asha literally means "what fits". It comprehends the truth of things (or the true order of things) in the existence of matter as well as of mind.

In the existence of matter, our material existence, "what fits" is what is correct, what is accurate – the truth of the natural laws that order the physical universe, the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, et cetera. Such physical truth is ethically neutral. It is neither friendly nor unfriendly. This aspect of Zarathushtra's quest for truth I will not focus on today, except to the extent it's existence relates to our lives.

In the existence of mind, the abstract existence of our lives, asha "what fits" is also what is correct, i.e. what is right, which, in the Gathas, includes such notions as truth, goodness, lovingkindness, generosity, solicitude, friendship, justice, compassion, et cetera. And his notion of the opposite of asha, comprises all that is false or wrong, which in the Gathas includes such things as ignorance, a lack of discernment, false judgment, fury, cruelty, violence, murder, tyranny, deceit, oppression, et cetera.

So in essence, asha is the truth of things, the truth of the way in which the existence of mind and matter have been ordered. There is no one English word which captures the full meaning of asha. The closest

English word is truth. But when you see the word truth used for asha, please remember: it is not just a factual truth, it includes the truths of mind and spirit.

So if asha is the truth of the way in which existence has been ordered, and if in the existence of mind, the abstract existence of our lives, asha is all that is true and good and right, then logically, we would have to conclude that our lives have been ordered in a way that is true and good and right. Are you skeptical? I was. Before I discovered Zarathushtra's unconventional thinking, I was much more inclined to Omar Khayam's view when he said:

"Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,  
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;  
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give---and take!"  
(From The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, translation by Edward Fitzgerald)

But Zarathushtra has changed my thinking, and I would like to show you how, in a few of the questions which affect our lives. In this first part of my talk, I will touch upon: The calamities of life. How can a good God allow bad things to happen to people? And what kind of a God is God? We will then have a coffee break, after which, in Part 2 of this talk, I will touch upon: Zarathushtra's thoughts regarding the two-fold purpose of life, his unique notions of how we worship, paradise, and how evil is defeated without the tortures of the conventional hell, followed by a question and answer period.

An ambitious undertaking which requires me to ask your indulgence. Each of these areas, to do them justice, should be the subject of a separate, in-depth talk. Overviews, of necessity, are simplistic. But they are valuable as well. They help us to see the big picture, and think about whether Zarathushtra's teachings are meaningful to our own lives.

Let us start with:

**1. The Calamities of Life.** You well may wonder: in concluding that our universe is a friendly place, am I deluding myself? Is this a classic case of religion being the opium with which to deal with the anxieties and uncertainties of life? In the face of natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, famine, in the face of centuries of religious persecution, in the face of personal tragedy and

loss, in the face of all the hostile and unfriendly forces beyond our control which we hear about, or experience ourselves, how can any thinking person conclude that the universe is a friendly place. How can we reconcile the existence of so much suffering with a friendly God, a God of wisdom and goodness, who is supposed to be in charge of it all.

When the immediacy of a calamity is brought home to us through personal experience, or through television, all explanations and generalizations seem inadequate. But at the risk of sounding inadequate, let us consider the matter.

It's not just a question of hurricanes and earthquakes. A thousand and one painful things happen to each and every one of us during the course of our lives. True, we are horrified by the devastation wrought by hurricanes or earthquakes, because the loss of life and the suffering is on so massive a scale. Yet, even without a hurricane, one family whose house burns down experiences the same loss as a person who loses his house in a hurricane. It's just not multiplied a thousandfold. The same goes for loss of life. A person who loses a parent or a spouse, or a child to, say, cancer, or a traffic accident, is as devastated as a person who loses a parent, spouse or child in an earthquake. The loss is just not multiplied a thousandfold. And the same goes for the sometimes quiet disappointments or sadnesses which we suffer which may not be hurricanes, but which can generate a lot of heartache.

So we come again to the question: Why? How could all these many different types of situations and events that cause us grief, anxiety, and pain, how could they possibly be consistent with *asha* -- an order of things that is true and right and good. Well, let us consider the matter from a different perspective.

Zarathushtra teaches that one of the purposes of life is to evolve or grow, from a state of being (*mainyu*) that is a mixture of "good" and "bad", to a state of being that is *haurvatat* (completeness, perfection), a state of being that personifies *asha*, that personifies all that is true and good and right.

How is this kind of spiritual growth brought about. If Mazda had ordered existence in such a way that we never suffered any pain, or any disappointments, or any loss, we would be in a state of perpetual status quo -- we would never grow. No matter how old we may be chronologically, we all have a child

inside us. We are all mixtures of child and adult. To pray: "Please don't let this bad thing happen to me" or "Please make this bad thing go away" is the prayer of the child inside us. Reacting to difficulties by getting angry (kicking and screaming) is also the reaction of the child inside us (and heaven knows, that is exactly the way in which I first react to such crises -- rebellion, anger, kicking the furniture in my mind at the senselessness of such "bad" things). Yet Zarathushtra teaches, and I believe deeply, that God is Wisdom personified (which is the meaning of His name -- Mazda). As such, He is not arbitrary. He is not capricious.

We know from the Gathas that Zarathushtra himself experienced persecution and life-threatening difficulties. In Y46, verse 1 he says:

"To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan. . . "Y46.1

But when he prays, he does not pray that the "bad" event be taken away, or never happen. He prays for understanding. He prays for help through good thinking (vohu mano). He asks for help through solutions that are in accord with asha (what is true and right).

" What **help by truth [asha]** hast Thou for Zarathushtra who calls? What **help by good thinking [vohu mano]** hast Thou for me, . . ." Y49.12.

"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.

Wise One, where are those sincere ones who, **through their possession of good thinking**, make even immoral decrees and painful legacies disappear? . . . **protect us in accord with truth [asha]**. Y34.7.

So now, when I find myself living through a difficult time, in the midst of all my rebellion and frustration, I try to follow Zarathushtra's example. I ask for understanding. I ask for help in solving the problem in a good way.

In my own life, each time I have experienced a given crisis, it seemed senseless at the time, and I did not see how any good could possibly come of it. But on looking back at each of these so-called "bad" things, I see that each one has taught me something. Each one, in some way, has made me a better person. These painful or disappointing "bad" experiences have the capacity for being our teachers, sculpting our souls. They are agents of transformation, transforming us into something better than what we were, depending on how we handle them -- a transformation which could not occur without such "bad" experiences.

Through Zarathushtra's thought, I have finally come to the realization that there isn't a single "bad" thing that can happen to me, which does not have the capacity for helping me in some way. As such, even though difficult experiences may bring grief, or pain, I no longer see them as "bad". I see them as agents of transformation, beneficial -- heavy blessings, but blessings nevertheless.

This realization has lightened the weight of anxiety and worry I used to carry around. Does this mean I no longer am anxious, or that I no longer worry. No, it doesn't. I still worry. But I now have a way of taming my worries, based, not on self delusion or religious platitudes, but based on my own past experiences, viewed through Zarathushtra's framework of belief.

It is through a huge variety of experiences, including good times, and also difficulties and adversities, that we grow -- depending on how we handle them. When they happen to us, we grow personally, based on how we handle them. When they happen to others, we also grow personally, by helping others to cope, and crafting effective solutions. As my friend, Shahriar, says: when many people work together towards a good end, it creates a synergy which is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a little like a symphony orchestra making beautiful music, if we play our parts well.

Whether at a collective level, or at an individual level, we need to help each other make it. A simple word of kindness, a joke to make someone laugh, helping a loved one cope with a mutual loss, having the courage to take action to correct an injustice, devising ways to minimize the devastation of future natural disasters, volunteering for the clean up, sending a financial contribution -- the ways to help

each other are as boundless as human imagination, and are limited only by human limitations (for which we should not feel guilty). We grow by both giving and receiving help.

It is true that often the devastation and loss we suffer can be traced to, or made worse by, wrong human choices. But it makes no difference. Whether we suffer grief, pain and loss because of the wrongful choices of others, or our own wrongful choices, or because of things that are beyond our control, the solution is still the same. It's how we handle the situation that matters, not its cause. Learning to handle these situations, learning from them, is a pre-requisite for growth -- our own, and that of others.

So we see that the so-called "bad" things that happen to us, can be agents of transformation. -- with help ever at hand from God and from each other. And we see the validity of Zarathushtra's teaching that for all its grief and pain, our existence has been ordered in a way that is true and good and right.

### **What kind of a God is God.**

Let us move on to Zarathushtra's notion of who we worship. What kind of a God is God?

You may recall that to Zarathushtra, religion is a search, a quest for *asha*. There is another dimension to this search or quest for *asha*. And that is our search, for the Divine.

We know from the Gathas that Zarathushtra lived in a society in which many gods were worshipped. He describes these gods as "**fierce**" (Y34.5), and the practices of their priests as cruel, violent, tyrannical,<sup>2</sup> a state of affairs that deeply troubled Zarathushtra – especially since he was on the receiving end of their malice, probably because of his outspoken criticism of their practices.

Using his mind to address the problem, he concluded that anger, cruelty, violence, tyranny, were not divine qualities, and that therefore the fierce and cruel local gods were not gods at all. They were not worthy of worship. Imagine the courage that took! Zarathushtra not only rejected these gods, he demoted them from “godhood”, concluding that "what fits" (*asha*) for the Divine, is also what is true and

right. He concluded that only a being who personifies asha, in all its thoughts, words and actions, is divine, is worthy of worship. Thus to Zarathushtra, the Divine is a personification of what fits, of all that is true and good and right -- asha. We see this very clearly in Y50.11, where Zarathushtra calls God Mazda (wisdom personified), and also truth (asha personified).

"Yes, I shall swear to be your praiser, **Wise One [mazda]**, and I shall be it, as long as I shall have strength and be able, **o truth [asha]**. . . "Y50.11.

To make it easier for us to understand, Zarathushtra, shows us this personification of asha, which is Divinity, in component parts: It comprises:

**asha:** all that is true and good and right;

**vohu mano:** intelligence committed to goodness, the comprehension of what is true and right (asha);

**aramaiti:** making what's true and right (asha) real, giving it substance, with our thoughts, words and actions,

**vohu xshathra:** good rule, the rule of asha, and vohu mano<sup>3</sup>, the rule of aramaiti<sup>4</sup>),

**haurvatat:** completeness, perfection, a state of being which personifies all of the foregoing, and

**ameretat:** non-deathness, the undying or enduring quality of personifying asha.

In the later texts, these component characteristics of Divinity were called by the collective term, amesha spenta. This Divine way of being is the benevolent (the spenta) way of being -- the way of being that is pure goodness itself, and that also helps to advances the forward progress of creation for all the living -- spenta mainyu. The way of being that is spenta (benevolent) through asha (truth/right), as Zarathushtra says in the very first verse of the Gathas.

Zarathushtra's conception of God is not that of a Life Force who gets angry or vengeful, hurling punishments or retribution on those who displease Him. His conception of God is that of a Life Force that personifies Wisdom (Mazda), that personifies all that is true and right, (asha), that is pure goodness, the benevolent way of being (spenta mainyu). In addition, his conception of God is not that of a Master to a servant, or even a Father to a child. It is that of a Friend to a friend. He says:



". . . Someone like Thee, Wise One, should declare to me, his friend, . . ." Y44.1

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

So we see that in Zarathushtra's conception of the Divine, is that of a friendly God. And just as God is friends with us, so too should we be friends with each other.

### **[COFFEE BREAK]**

#### **Zarathushtra's notions of the purpose of life, worship and paradise.**

Let us next consider Zarathushtra's unique notions regarding the two-fold purpose of life, how we worship, and his notion of paradise.

How does one worship Wisdom personified. How does one worship pure goodness? How does one worship a Friend.

In the book, Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein,<sup>5</sup> there is an interesting section on religion, in which Einstein says:

"With primitive man it is above all fear that evokes religious notions -- fear of hunger, wild beasts, sickness, death. Since at this state of existence understanding of causal connections is usually poorly developed, the human mind creates illusory beings more or less analogous to itself on whose wills and actions these fearful happenings depend. Thus one tries to secure the favor of these beings by carrying out actions and offering sacrifices which, . . . . propitiates them or makes them well disposed toward a mortal. In this sense, I am speaking of a religion of fear."<sup>6</sup>

From what we can read in the Gathas, it was precisely this religion of fear that existed in Zarathushtra's society.<sup>7</sup> And just as Zarathushtra rejected the primitive notion of gods, as beings who were fierce and cruel, so also he rejected the primitive notion of worship as requiring sacrifices to keep such gods from being angry with us, so that bad things did not happen to us.

In an age when man's worship was fear based, when worship consisted of slaughtering animals in stone temples, Zarathushtra advances the unique idea of worshipping Wisdom (Mazda) in the temple of life, with His own divine qualities, with our thoughts, words and actions. There are many verses in the Gathas which show this unique type of worship. For example, he says:

“...I shall always worship all of you, Wise Lord, with truth [asha] and the very best thinking, and with their rule [xshathra] ...” Y50.4.

“I...shall serve all of you, Wise Lord, with good thinking [vohu mano]...” Y28.2.

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

“I shall try to glorify Him for us with prayers of [aramaiti]...”Y45.10 [ i.e. with prayers of thoughts, words and actions of asha].

In short, he teaches us to worship the Divine by re-creating His divine qualities with each choice we make, in thought, word and action, in every aspect of our lives. We worship His asha by being truthful, and doing what's right. We worship His good thinking by our own good thinking. We worship His aramaiti by bringing asha to life with our own thoughts, words and actions. We worship His good rule by using whatever power we have for good.

This is an action-oriented worship. A worship that requires us to take the initiative to solve the problems which occur, in our lives, in our communities, in our world.

I used to wonder how it was that Televangelists and certain charismatic religious leaders can get thousands and thousands of followers, while Zarathushtra's teachings do not seem to generate that kind of mass appeal. I think one reason is that Zarathushtra's teachings in the Gathas do not promise magical solutions by someone else who can make everything turn out O.K. To Zarathushtra, the magic is us. We have to use our minds and hearts to create our own magic, our own solutions, that are in harmony with asha.

Most religions also include the notion of some reward for worship.

What does Zarathushtra say our reward will be, for worshipping Wisdom with its own Divine characteristics? The reward he speaks of in the Gathas is twofold, and relates to the two fold purpose of life.

At a personal level, the reward for worshipping Mazda with His own divine qualities is that we eventually attain these divine qualities, the amesha spenta. We become what we choose. Each time we think, speak or act in a manner that is consistent with asha, we think, speak and act in a divine way, however briefly. The more we do so, the more like asha we become, until eventually, we personify asha completely, in all our thoughts, words and actions.

Zarathushtra's idea of paradise is not a place of pleasures and delight, to which we go after death. His paradise is a quality of being. He calls paradise the "[House of Good Thinking](#)"<sup>8</sup> and the "[House of Song](#)"<sup>9</sup>. "[House](#)" is used in the Gathas as a metaphor for a state of being.<sup>10</sup> So what state of being is he describing, when he speaks of the "[House of Good Thinking](#)"? It is a state of being that is wisdom personified. What state of being is he describing when he speaks of the "[House of Song](#)"? Perhaps it is a state of being that is like the high we get when we listen to a very beautiful piece of music. A state of bliss.

In short, Zarathushtra's notion of worship is not for us to kneel, or humiliate ourselves, or chastise ourselves, or condemn ourselves, in self-abnegation. His notion of worship is self-realization, personifying the qualities of divinity, becoming one with the Divine. That is one of the purposes of life. This thought of becoming one with the Divine is beautifully expressed in a later Avestan prayer which appears as Y60.12 (not a part of the Gathas):

<p style="text-align: center;"><a href="#">"Through the best [asha]</a> <a href="#">Through the highest [asha]</a> <a href="#">May we catch sight of Thee [i.e. understand the Divine]</a> <a href="#">May we approach Thee [i.e. follow the path to the Divine]</a> <a href="#">May we be in perfect union with Thee."</a> <a href="#">[i.e. become one with the Divine].</a></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><a href="#">Yasna 60.12. (Taraporewala translation).<sup>11</sup></a></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><a href="#">Asha vahishta</a> <a href="#">Asha sraeshta</a> <a href="#">Daresama thwa</a> <a href="#">Pairi thwa jamyama</a> <a href="#">Hamem thwa hakhma</a></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><a href="#">Y60.12</a> <a href="#">(also used as part of the</a> <a href="#">Hoshbam prayer)</a></p>
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The second purpose of life is to make our world a better place. And that too is the reward for worshipping God with His own divine qualities. Because it is impossible to think, speak or act in accordance with what is true and right (asha), without benefiting the people, or the circumstances that are affected by such thoughts, words and actions. Zarathushtra tells us that understanding and implementing what is true and right brings prosperity. He speaks of:

" . . . truth [asha] **which prospers** the creatures, . . ." Y33.11

" . . . the rule [xshathra] of good thinking [vohu mano], through the actions of which the creatures allied with truth [asha] **do prosper**. . ." Y43.6.

" . . . Have they truly seen that vision which is the best for those who exist, and which in companionship with truth [asha], **would prosper** my creatures already allied with truth [asha] through words and acts stemming from [aramaiti]?. . ." Y44.10.

" . . . Friyana, the Turanian, the one **who prospered** his creatures with the zeal of [aramaiti], . . ." Y46.12

So when we bring the divine to life with thoughts, words, and actions that are true and right (asha), in each such instance, we create a touch of the divine, a touch of paradise, in our souls and in our world, until eventually our souls attain haurvatat (completeness, perfection) and our world is perfected as well (the frashokereti of the later texts).

In short, this kind of worship, and the paradise which is its reward, brings both our souls and our world, into harmony with asha, with the underlying truth which governs our existence -- a far more effective way of taming our fears, and dealing with the difficulties of life, than animal or other sacrifices to appease angry gods or win their favors. It is a friendly worship, for a friendly God, which helps to transform us, and our world, into a friendly existence.

### **Defeating evil without the tortures of hell.**

Let us move on to consider how evil is defeated without the tortures of the conventional hell.

You well may wonder: Would a God of pure goodness, even one who is super intelligent, be effective in a world where people are free to make wrong choices, and where wrongdoing is often so very strong? Would a God of pure goodness be capable of defeating evil? If you have such doubts, don't feel bad. These very doubts troubled Zarathushtra himself. He says:

"Have ye the mastery, have ye the power, Wise One, for the act to protect your needy dependent -- as I indeed am -- with truth [asha] and with good thinking [vohu mano]? . . ."Y34.5

Zarathushtra does not see the answer to this question in the idea of hell as a place of punishment for those who do wrong. In the Gathas, he calls hell the "[House of Worst Thinking](#)"<sup>12</sup> and "[The House of Deceit](#)."<sup>13</sup> If "[House](#)" is a metaphor for a state of being, what state of being is Zarathushtra describing when he speaks of the "[House of Worst Thinking](#)" and "[The House of Deceit \[drujo demana\]](#)"? We know that druj is the opposite of asha. And we know that the worst thinking is the opposite of vohu mano, good thinking (the comprehension of asha). So a state of being that is druj, and the worst thinking, is a state of being that is ignorant, deluded, wrongheaded -- the opposite of a state of being that personifies Wisdom (as in the "[House of Good Thinking](#)" ). Zarathushtra's heaven and hell are not places. They are states of being.

The conventional wisdom is that God deals with good and evil by a system of rewards and punishment: that He rewards a good person by sending him to heaven, a place that is full of every imaginable delight depending on your preferences; and that He punishes a bad person by sending him to hell, a place of torture and suffering, whether eternal or temporary. According to conventional wisdom, if you are bad, you are going to be severely and painfully punished in a place from which there is no escape.

Does this make sense to you?

I don't know a single human being who is all bad, or all good either for that matter. Is it justice to punish a person with the tortures of hell, because he has done things that are wrong, when he also has done things that are good and right? Yet we are told that God is just.

In the second place, what is to be gained by subjecting a person to pure agony, as hell is said to be. Does he learn anything from it, other than fear? Does his agony in hell undo the wrong he did? Does it bring the victim of a murderer back to life? The notion of hell as a place where "bad" people are punished by being tortured, seems to reflect the human desire for revenge, extrapolated into a supernatural model.

Then too, there is the control factor. The conventional notions of heaven and hell seem to be an attempt at controlling human behavior with bribery and fear -- the bribery of heaven (as a place of delights) and the fear of hell (as a place of torture). Can revenge, bribery, and torture be characteristics of the Divine? Aren't these the very characteristics of the local gods of Zarathushtra's day which he rejected?

So we come again to the question: given the freedom to choose, how does a God of pure goodness defeat evil?

Well, we first need to understand Zarathushtra notion of "evil". In the Gathas, every descriptive reference to evil is the product of wrongful choices -- cruelty, violence, anger, ignorance, deceit, false understanding, et cetera. As concepts, these things have no reality, no substance. They become real only when we bring them to life with our thoughts, words and actions. So how are they defeated? Clearly punishment is not an effective way, because when the fear of punishment is removed, the inclination to evil would still be there, ready to spring to life in our thoughts, words and actions. Zarathushtra's solution is that evil is defeated, not by throwing someone into hell -- eternal or otherwise -- but by causing minds change, so that a person prefers to not make evil choices in thought, word and action, freely and of his own accord. And how is this accomplished?

Ever consistent, according to Zarathushtra, it is accomplished by asha (truth and what's right), its comprehension (vohu mano), its realization in thought, word and action (aramaiti) and its resulting good rule (vohu xshathra).

Allow me to explain. The concept of asha of "what fits" includes that perfect justice which generates the law of consequences -- that we reap what we sow, that everything we do comes back to us, the good and the bad.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra often associates the law of consequences (which is a part of asha) with fire (which is one of his material metaphors for asha). For example:

".....those rewards Thou shalt give, through the heat of Thy truth-strong [asha-strong] fire, to the deceitful and to the truthful, ....." Y43.4.

When we ourselves experience the kind of wrongdoing we have done to others, we understand that this is not the way we want things to be. Our experiences inform our preferences, so that eventually we choose, out of preference not compulsion, to not make such wrongful choices again.

The law of consequences, however painful it may be, is not for punishment. Its purpose is enlightenment, as part of an educational process. How do we know that the law of consequences is not for punishment? For two reasons: First, because in the Gathas we are told that Mazda administers it with His good thinking (vohu mano), and with a benevolent way of being (spenta mainyu); and second, because we are told that it delivers "satisfaction" and "the good" to both factions -- those who choose correctly, and to those who choose wrongfully. For example:

"...May He dispense **through His good thinking** (each) reward corresponding to one's actions." Y43.16.

"Wise Lord, **together with this virtuous spirit [spenta mainyu]**, Thou shalt give the distribution **in the good to both factions** through Thy fire, by reason of the solidarity of [aramaiti] and truth [asha]. For it shall convert the many who are seeking." Y47.6.

".....when the distribution **in the good** shall occur **to both factions** through Thy bright fire, Wise One." Y31.19.

"The **satisfaction** which Thou shalt give **to both factions** through Thy pure fire and the molten iron, Wise One. . ." Y51.9.

You well may ask: If, under the law of consequences, the evil we do comes back to us, how can it distribute "the good" and "satisfaction" to those who choose correctly and also to those who choose wrongly. Well, it is in the end result that the law of consequences distributes "the good" and

"satisfaction" to all. It returns abundant good for the good done, and, through the painful, difficult, experiences resulting from our wrong choices, it helps to increase understanding which changes evil preferences into good ones as well, thus distributing "the good" and "satisfaction" to those who choose wrongly as well.

However, the law of consequences alone, is not enough to change minds. We see only too often that when someone has been wronged, it breeds a desire for revenge. The abused sometimes become abusers. Clearly, something more is needed to break this cycle of revenge and abuse, in addition to the law of consequences, in addition to the idea that what we do comes back to us. That something is another aspect of asha -- beneficence, lovingkindness -- made real through our thoughts, words and actions, which is the concept of aramaiti.

In the Gathas, we are told, repeatedly, that the Wise Lord helps with truth and good thinking. The angels He sends to help us are His thoughts, His understanding. But other angels come to help us as well. These angels are those who bring His divine qualities to life, however temporarily, with their thoughts, words and actions, who have the courage to do what's right, and who are generous, good, loving.

I think in our religion, to be an angel, is to personify the divine. As Mazda does completely. And as we do now and then, with our good thoughts, words and actions. That is the way we become His partners in defeating evil.

We all belong to this brotherhood of part-time angels. You probably just didn't recognize yourself (no halo, no wings, how's a person supposed to know!).

So, with the loving help of these assorted angels – the Wise Lord, His divine attributes, and each other – we make it through the refiner's fire that is the law of consequences, and we become "world-healers". In the Gathas, the term "world-healer" is used to describe Ahura Mazda himself (Y44.16)<sup>14</sup>, and Zarathushtra (Y31.19)<sup>15</sup>, and also a loving person. Zarathushtra describes a person who is a world healer in Y44.2 as follows:



“..... the loving man ..... such a person, ... [spenta] through ... [asha], watching over the heritage for all, is a world-healer and Thy ally in spirit [mainyu], Wise One.” (Y44.2).

It is an interesting paradox that to defeat evil by changing minds, we need the exact, relentless, workings of the law of consequences, as well as the generosity of lovingkindness which does not look for an exact (or any) exchange -- all of which are included within the notion of asha, of "what fits". All of which are necessary to bring about the understanding that changes minds, so that we freely, out of preference, and without compulsion, make choices, which do not bring evil to life with our thoughts words and actions.

This process of transformation, of changing minds and preferences through experience, would necessarily be a long one, filled with an infinite variety of experiences, both earned and unearned, over a very long period of time. But it shows us that evil can indeed be defeated by asha. And we see again the validity of Zarathushtra's premise, that the underlying truth which governs existence is good.

It is interesting that Zarathushtra's thought lays to rest the oft repeated philosophical dilemma that God is either not all powerful, or not all good, because if He allows evil to exist and cannot stop it, He is not all powerful, whereas if He can stop it and does not, He cannot be all good.

Zarathushtra discloses a third alternative – that of a Life Force who orders existence in such a way that the freedom to choose, which may increase evil in the short term, generates the experiences which ensure its ultimate defeat, thereby demonstrating:

**His power:** because He can defeat evil;

**His goodness:** because He does so with the way in which He has ordered existence -- the law of consequences, and the beneficence of mutual, loving help through good thoughts, words and actions (**asha** and **aramaiti**); and

**His wisdom:** because with the way in which He has ordered existence, we come to the realizations (**vohu mano**) which defeat evil, for ourselves, freely and without compulsion -- our freedom to choose being an indispensable requirement for bringing about the defeat of evil.

It is a reflection of Zarathushtra's genius that he uses 7 concepts to encompass his entire theology including his notion of the Divine, the way to the Divine, how we worship, the reward for such worship, the purpose of life, the path of individual spiritual growth, and making our world a better place. Those seven concepts are the amesha spenta:

All that is true and good and right (asha)

Its comprehension (voḥu mano)

Its realization in thought, word and action, (aramaiti)

Its good rule (voḥu xshathra)

It's complete personification, it's perfection (haurvatat)

It's resulting enduring, undying, nature (ameretat).

All of which comprise the beneficent, the good, generous, loving, way of being (spenta mainyu)

In conclusion, whether we consider Zarathushtra's ideas regarding suffering and calamities, or the nature of God, or the way we worship, or the purpose of life, or his notion of paradise as a state of being, or the effective defeat of evil by changing minds, instead of the punitive tortures of the conventional hell, we see that the truth which underlies our existence is beneficent, good, all that is true and right (asha). We see that for all its griefs and pains, our universe has indeed been ordered in a friendly way, a way that is true and good and right -- asha.

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<sup>1</sup> As it appears in: Insler, **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.

<sup>2</sup> "...the rich Karpan [a type of priest] chose the rule of tyrants and deceit rather than truth." Y32.12;

"During their regimes, the Karpans [priests] and the Kavis [princes] yoked (us) with evil actions ....." Y46.11;

"When, Wise One, shall men desist from murdering? When shall they fear the folly of that intoxicating drink, through the effects of which the Karpans as well as the evil rulers of the lands torture our (good) intentions in an evil way?" Y48.10.

<sup>3</sup> ". . .the rule of truth and good thinking. . ."Y29.10; ". . .the rule of good thinking and of truth" Y30.7 and Y33.10; ". . .the rule of good thinking. . ."Y43.6 and many other verses.

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<sup>4</sup> ". . . Grant thou [aramaiti], your rule of good thinking for the glory of the Mighty One." Y51.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein, based on Mein Weltbild, edited by Carl Seelig, and other sources, with new translations and revisions by Sonja Bergmann, (Bonanza Books, NY 1954).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pages 36 -- 37. As Einstein sees it, from a religion of fear, man's thinking progresses to a moral conception of God, and then, to a third conception, which he describes as follows:

"But there is a third stage of religious experience which belongs to all of them, even though it is rarely found in a pure form: I shall call it **cosmic religious feeling**. It is very difficult to elucidate this feeling to anyone who is entirely without it, especially as there is no anthropomorphic conception of God corresponding to it. The individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole." Ibid. at page 38 (emphasis added).

I find Einstein's "cosmic religious feeling" very close to Zarathushtra's conception of Mazda, but also different from Zarathushtra's conception, in that Einstein's conception of "God" seems to be an impersonal one. He still seemed to view this cosmic "God" through the spectacles of conventional religious thought, as a Being separate and apart from man and all the living. Whereas Zarathushtra's conception (as I understand it) is that this cosmic Divine, and all the living, are part of the same whole, with each part of the whole assisting each other part, not necessarily as a provider of goods and services, or to shield us from unpleasant experiences, but rather to attain the ultimate objective of transformation, the attainment of haurvatat / ameretat. As each part of the whole makes it, that part becomes one with Mazda (a conclusion that also is suggested and corroborated by Zarathushtra's technique of sometimes referring to Mazda in the singular, and sometimes in the plural, See Metaphor in the Gathas, Part 3, on [www.vohuman.org](http://www.vohuman.org)).

<sup>7</sup> We see it even more clearly in the Yashts, where we are told that various heroes and princes offered sacrifices of hundreds of animals in order to win particular favors from local deities. For example in the Aban Yasht, referring to the deity Ardivi Sura Anahita, it is stated: "To her did Yima Khshaeta, the good shepherd, offer up a sacrifice . . . with a hundred male horses, a thousand oxen, ten thousand lambs." Chap. VII, verse 25, Sacred Books of the East, Volume 23, page 59 (Motilal Benarsidas reprint). And this same kind of animal sacrifice, in the same quantities, and for the same purpose of obtaining various favors by various famous people, is repeated in this Yasht in Chap. IX, verse 33, Chap. X, verse 41, Chap. XI, verse 41, Chap. XII verse 45, Chap. XIII, verse 49, Chap. XV, verse 57, Chap. XVIII, verse 72, Chap. XX, verse 81, Chap. XXV, verse 108, Chap. XXVI, verse 112, Chap. XXVII, verse 116.

<sup>8</sup> "...those who rule over life at will in the House of Good Thinking." Y32.15.

<sup>9</sup> "... Yes, let us set down His glories in the House of Song." Y45.8; ". . . the truly sincere ones existing in the House of Song." Y50.4.

<sup>10</sup> For the evidence from the Gathas on which this conclusion is based, please see Metaphor in the Gathas, Part 2, The Houses of Heaven and Hell, which appears on [www.vohuman.org](http://www.vohuman.org)

<sup>11</sup> Translated by Taraporewala in his little book "A Few Daily Prayers". This Y60.12, was included in the Hoshbam prayer by those who created the Hoshbam prayer as part of the Khordeh Avesta. I have left "asha" untranslated. Taraporewala translates it as "Righteousness". The insertions in square brackets in the 3d, 4th and 5th lines are my explanations.

<sup>12</sup> "Because of such (evil) rule, the destroyers of this world viewed their riches in the House of Worst Thinking. . ." Y32.13.

<sup>13</sup> "But the deceitful persons, bad in rule, bad in actions and words, bad in conceptions and thoughts, them shall their souls continue to encounter with foul food when they shall be the true guests in the House of Deceit." Y49.11. See also Y46.11, and Y51.14.

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<sup>14</sup> ". . . As world-healer, promise us a judge, and let obedience to him come through good thinking . . ." Y44.16.

<sup>15</sup> "This knowing world-healer [Insler's footnote: "Namely, Zarathushtra"] has listened, he who has respected the truth, Lord, . . ." Y31.19.

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