

Zarathushtra

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We live in troubled times today, when danger, uncertainty, deception and ignorance seem to be rampant. Terrorist acts occur with alarming frequency and outbreak of war in different parts of the world appears to be imminent. Disclosure of financial frauds and scams occurs often and even the highest courts of the lands try to subvert the established decisions of the past. The stability of our lives seems threatened, and our expectations for a peaceful and prosperous future appear to be undermined and thwarted by these malicious actions. Frustration, despair and disillusionment are commonplace, and the search for positive changes among these depressing situations seems to lead nowhere. At every turn we encounter disappointment; anxiety gnaws at our brains and emotions.

We feel all these disturbing things strongly because we are part of these vexing times, and they impinge upon every aspect of our lives. Our pain is a living pain, and there seems to be no remedy at hand that can quiet it. But these unfortunate and often disastrous situations have occurred throughout history, and in many cases they have been documented in detail. This was especially true in the 20th century, when literacy and communication had developed on a global scale, matching only the development of the means of mass destruction. But if we reach back further into history, we also find ample evidence and testimony of such malicious acts and depressing conditions that were recorded for future generations. Remarkably, nowhere have these matters been noted with such clarity and such passion as in a small collection of poetic hymns that stand at the beginning of Iranian literary and religious history.

Here I am referring to the Songs of Zarathustra, an extraordinary collection of some 250 poetic verses composed by a remarkable philosopher and religious innovator whose name is the basis of the world religion known as Zoroastrianism. Zarathustra lived sometime in the very early centuries of the 1st millennium before our era, and he taught and preached most probably in the northern reaches of Iran. All that survives from his fertile and penetrating mind is a small set of sacrificial hymns chiefly dedicated to Ahura Mazdā, The Wise Lord, who was his supreme god. Despite the scantiness of this collection of hymns, known as gāthās in his language, Zarathustra left an indelible imprint on the subsequent history of Iran.

Zarathustra's times were as troubled as ours today. He informs us in his work that evil rulers attack just and innocent people, that the rich rob the poor, that the judges produce false decisions in order to aid their benefactors. Zarathustra goes on to say that fury and violence assault the people and that everywhere deceit and deception hold the upper hand. Like us, Zarathustra often expresses his despair and frustration to Ahura Mazdā, and although he longs for change, he sometimes wonders whether such positive change will ever take place.

However, driven by anguish and yet moved by what he called the disease of his world, like a physician Zarathustra sought to find a remedy to heal and cure it. He began his quest by searching for those things which were unchanging and immutable, things that resisted the perfidy and upheavals in the world that surrounded him. These he found in the elements of nature, such as the sun, moon, stars, wind, waters, plants and the like. Moreover, Zarathustra noted that these elements reappeared with both reliability and regularity. The sun rose and set each day, the moon cycled each month, the stars reappeared every night, the flow of rivers was constant, plants and crops grew anew every year. All these elements clearly obeyed an overarching principle of nature that both maintained them in an unchanging manner and also imparted order to their existence. Like his Indo-Iranian forefathers, Zarathustra called this principle *truth*.

But who created these immutable elements of nature and who formulated the principle of *truth* that controlled the order of these things in the world? Furthermore, what was the purpose in doing so? Surely only a being of great power and wisdom was capable of fashioning these elements and creating the principle of *truth* that gave rise to their eternal design and rhythm. This divine and superior being Zarathustra named Ahura Mazdā, the Wise Lord, for the Ahura Mazdā was the only true and valid god. Furthermore, Zarathustra understood why the Wise Lord had fashioned these things. Ahura Mazdā had also created all living beings, and through his *good thinking* the Wise Lord realized that there had to be means to sustain and nourish these creatures. This was the purpose of the harmonious and unchanging design of nature. It was created for the good of the living world. Through these reflections, Zarathustra conceived of a totally new religious system in which *wisdom*, *truth*, and *good thinking* were its highest principles, a system intended to produce *well-being* and *continuing life* in the world of mankind.

However, if it had been Ahura Mazdā's intention to create a good life on earth, why was the world of man beset by unsettling, dangerous and menacing conditions? Zarathustra easily saw the answer. It was because evil also existed in the world. In fact, everywhere Zarathustra looked, he found an evil counterpart to every good condition. Besides peace and friendship, abundant food and water there were war and enmity, starvation and drought; besides knowledge and understanding, loyalty and respect there were ignorance and prejudice, opposition and disrespect. In all his reflections on the human condition, Zarathustra realized that for every bright aspect of life there was also a dark side, and consequently he was able to systematize all of human existence and human endeavor into two camps: the side of good and the side of evil.

What, then, was the cause of evil? If *truth* was the principle that organized the good and beneficial aspects of life, then its counterpart must be responsible for what is evil and destructive in the world. In Zarathustra's conception, that counterpart was *deceit*. Deceit was the corrosive principle of existence that viciously strove to undermine the principles of the good life. Consequently, for the founder of this new and innovative religious and philosophical system, there was no middle ground, no centrist position. There existed only two opposing forces in the world, and these were *truth* and *deceit*. Furthermore, every man was free to choose to ally himself either with the side of *truth* or the side of *deceit*. There was no predestination in Zarathustra's religion. There was only free will, and every responsible person was obliged to choose sides in the continuing conflict between good and evil.

Out of these profound reflections Zarathustra envisioned a different world order that he called the *good vision*. It was the vision of the world of mankind governed by the same harmonious and reliable principle of *truth* that controlled the order of the immutable elements of nature, and it could be promoted among men through *understanding* and *good thinking*. Whether as individuals or as ruling authorities, Zarathustra believed that this *rule of truth and good thinking* could be enacted on earth through *good thoughts, good words and good deeds*. These were the only means to achieve *well-being* and *continuing life* on earth.

Zarathustra's life was not easy. His ideas were too radical for the traditional community in which he was raised. He tells us in his poetry that he was driven from his family and land, and that he wandered under great hardship until he was accepted by the nobleman Vishtaspa, whose tribe or clan became the first adherents of Zarathustra's teaching. This was a modest beginning assuredly, but Zarathustra's ideas were so persuasive that they were subsequently adopted by the great empires that arose in Iran. Throughout history the Iranians were famed for their great respect for truth, an enduring testimonial to the majestic teachings of Zarathustra.

Today Zarathustra's ideas seem in no way radical, but offer in many respects the paradigm for building a good life for all mankind. Organizations like the United Nations strive to bring peace and prosperity to the world by condemning war, terrorism and aggression, by eliminating disease, hunger, and poverty, by encouraging understanding and discussion among disputing countries. Other public-minded organizations attempt to control the globalization of greed and deception. All these beneficial activities mirror ideas that are prominent in the teachings of Zarathustra.

As individuals we must also take a firm and unswerving stand for promoting truth in the world. Although our personal efforts may seem useless in the broader picture of things, they can be effective in our dealings and relations with other individuals. Indeed Zarathustra enjoins us in his Songs to win each other through truth because it will be of great benefit to us. The method is simple. Through good thoughts, good words and good deeds each of us can promote the good life on earth in our family, among our friends and in our communities. The battle against deceit can be won in a cumulative campaign, but it demands perseverance and loyalty.

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