

DG McIntyre - Three Prayers and the Name of God

Written for my son, Rich,
who asked for "a couple of prayers with meanings"
and for all my children.

Nobody knows exactly when Zarathushtra lived. Opinions range between 6,500 BC and 600 BC.

Nobody knows for sure where Zarathushtra lived, except that it was somewhere around ancient Iran.

And for many hundreds of years, the language in which Zarathushtra composed his Gathas was not known or understood. The Gathas are the only extant work in that language, which is why the language is called "Gathic".

You may wonder: how could such precious knowledge have been lost!

Part of the reason may have been that with the passing of time, the religion for many centuries, was in the hands of souls who were not enlightened, who made political compromises, who turned it into a profit making institution, a control mechanism, and who were not able to grasp, and therefore maintain, the pure, spiritual truths that Zarathushtra taught.

But the major reasons for this loss of knowledge were two devastating invasions which included the burning of our religious texts, and the killing of learned teachers. The first occurred when Alexander (mistakenly called The Great) defeated the Persian empire around 330 BC (the Persian emperor whom he defeated was no beauty either). It is reported that Alexander sent one copy of the Zoroastrian texts to his teacher Aristotle, and burned the rest. An ancient Zoroastrian work states that he:

"...took away and burned those scriptures, ... which had been written in gold water on prepared cowhide, and deposited in Stakhr i Pabagan in the Fortress of Writing. He killed many of the high priests and the judges....and the upholders of the religion, and the able ones and the wise men of Iran."¹

Some of the Greek philosophers are so close in their thinking to Zarathushtra's ideas, that I have often wondered if those learned men of Iran who were not killed, but who were sent to Greece as slaves along with the Zoroastrian texts, may have transmitted this knowledge to their Greek masters, wanting it to survive, even if it meant that it would survive as Greek thought.

It is interesting that Plato called Zarathushtra the father of philosophy. "Philosophy" means love of wisdom. The ancient Iranian name for the Zoroastrian religion is "mazdayasna" which means "worship of wisdom" which in Zarathushtra's view means to serve it with love (Y51.22).

And Zarathushtra's name for God is **Ahura Mazda**, -- the Wise Lord (or Lordly Wisdom).

Because learning was not universal in those days, but was limited to a few, Alexander's actions in killing the learned dealt a devastating blow to knowledge of the religion in those who were left in Iran, where it survived (in a somewhat corrupted form) during the Parthian and Sassanian empires.

The second loss occurred when the Sassanian empire was defeated by the Arabs around 650 AD. An early historian writes that after the invaders:

"...had killed their learned men and priests, and had burned their books and writings, they became entirely illiterate....."²

In waves starting around 900 AD, some Zoroastrians fled to India to avoid religious persecution and death at the hands of the new rulers.

Long after Zarathushtra, the Gathas were incorporated into other, later, texts (now called the Yasna³), which were preserved (at first verbally, later in writing) because they were recited by the priests from memory as part of the rituals of worship. As centuries passed, even though the priests no longer understood what they were reciting, they

faithfully continued to memorize and recite these ancient texts, passing them down from one generation to the next. This is how the Gathas have survived down to our time.

It is only within the last 50 to 100 years that western scholars have succeeded in decoding this ancient language so that we now understand perhaps 80 per cent of it, although there are still many differences both in translation and interpretation.

Part of the problems of interpretation have stemmed from the view that such lofty thoughts could not possibly have existed in such ancient (read primitive) times. Therefore, with noble exceptions, the Gathas have been interpreted with little understanding of their metaphorical, multi-layered and deeply spiritual meanings.

But the ultimate betrayal has occurred at the hands of some present-day Zoroastrians who expound the view that the Gathas are "mere poetry" and "just ethics" which indicates how little they understand them.

You have asked for "a couple of" Zarathushtra's prayers, with meanings. I have selected the three oldest Zarathushtrian "prayers" -- the **Ashem Vohu**, the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo**, and the **Yenghe Haataam**. Because you wish to meditate on these prayers, I have also added the name that Zarathushtra uses to describe God -- **Ahura Mazda**, as I think it repays meditation.

The first two prayers are in Gathic and were probably composed by Zarathushtra himself. The third prayer, according to good scholars, contains linguistic inaccuracies and differences, indicating that it was probably composed some time after Zarathushtra, when Gathic was no longer the prevalent language. Nevertheless, the thoughts it expresses are very Gathic (at least in my view), so I have included it with the other two.

I have concluded with a small poem of mine, **In Search Of**, which I hope you like, and with some quotations from the Gathas.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra shows a very intense, personal relationship with God. He talks to God, he argues with Him, he complains to Him, he asks questions of Him, he praises Him, he worships Him, he loves Him, he commits to Him, he asks for help. (Zarathushtra himself was the object of intense persecution because of his views). And he believes that prayers are always answered if they have two ingredients -- good purpose and love. He says to God:

"...For I know that words deriving from good purpose and from love are not to be left wanting by you." (The Gathas, Y28.10). "...For I know that words deriving from good purpose and from love are not to be left wanting by you." (The Gathas, Y28.10).⁴

However, the three prayers which I have selected are not addressed to God, which is the conventional notion of prayer. Rather, they are mantras, little nuggets of wisdom with many layers of meaning which are revealed when you let your mind play over them (or meditate on them) with an understanding of Zarathushtra's ideas. I can only assume that the function of these three prayers was to express and reveal to those who thought about them, the truths we need for spiritual growth. The fact that they are in a language most of us do not now understand directly, makes such meditation more difficult, but still worthwhile.

But when all's said and done, it is the way we live our lives that can be the loveliest prayer of all. That is something I have learned from Zarathushtra. It is interesting that in his view, prayers can be thoughts, prayers can be words, and prayers can be actions -- the full spectrum of living in this reality -- each thought, each word, each act, is an act of worship, if done with **asha**.

As to the translations, I am not a linguist. I have attempted to consult what I believe to be credible translations -- mostly Professor Insler's. The translations differ greatly, and I have made choices, based on the ideas I see in the Gathas.

Zarathushtra sees the Way as a joyful thing.

".....I shall speak of those things which are to be borne in mind which things are to be looked upon in joy throughout your days." (Y30.1).

In the spiritual path of your choice, I wish you joy, my beloved ones, and "endless lights".

1. As written in the **Arda Viraz Namag**, [not one of my favorite books] as translated by Fereydun Vahman, and provided to me by my friend Farrokh Vajifdar of London.

2. Mirza, Outlines of Parsi History, page 362, quoting from the historian Al-Biruni.

3. The Gathas appear as Yasna Chapters 28 through 34, and 43 through 51, and 53. All citations here to the Yasna (Y) will be to the Gathas, unless I state otherwise.

4. As translated by Insler, in The Gathas of Zarathushtra, (Brill 1975). All direct quotations from the Gathas, and all references to the Gathas, in this paper, are quoted from, or refer to, the Insler translation, although he may, or may not, agree with the inferences which I draw from his translation.

Ashem Vohu

Ashem vohu vahishtem asti

ushta asti ushta ahmai

hyat ashai vahishtai ashem.

Truth exists as the very best good.

It exists under (your) will

Desire the truth for that which is the very best truth.

"**ushta**" has been translated as "illumination"¹, happiness², blessing or blessedness,³ and also as wish or desire.⁴ Although superficially, these differences seem great. They don't matter to the essence of the prayer, as you will see.

The Meanings of the Ashem Vohu Prayer.

At the simplest level, the **Ashem Vohu** stands for the proposition:

- That truth is the best,
- that it is available to all who desire it,
- and that we should desire the truth for truth's own best sake, -- not to be well thought of, not because we want to be rewarded, not because we fear "hell" or "bad karma", but simply for its own sake, because it is the right thing to do;

However, the prayer has a deeper significance because of the multi-dimensional meanings which Zarathushtra ascribes to two of its words -- **asha** (of which **ashem** and **ashai** are grammatical variants) and **vahishta** (of which **vahishtem** and **vahishtai** are grammatical variants). After you see what these meanings are, we can re-read the prayer with this deeper understanding, to appreciate its significance. The prayer probably has more significance than I have discovered, but this is what I have discovered to date.

Asha Asha is an aspect of divinity. The word literally means "what fits". It applies to the laws that govern the worlds of mind and matter.

In the world of matter, what fits is what is accurate, the truth. The natural laws that order the universe are an expression of this divine force -- **asha**.⁵

In the world of mind and spirit, what fits is what is right. In the Gathas, truth, goodness, compassion, lovingkindness, generosity, benevolence, a complete absence of evil are the qualities connected with the word **asha**.⁶ In the Gathas, evil is described as the product of wrongful choices -- deceit, cruelty, greed, murder, fury, violence, bondage, oppression, et cetera. So **asha** in the world of mind and spirit means not only what is good, but also the absence of

what is not good. In other words, **asha** in its highest or best form means pure truth, pure rightness, pure goodness, pure compassion, pure love, pure generosity.

Asha Asha ("what fits") is also that perfect justice which sets in motion the law of consequences -- that the good and evil we do comes back to us -- not by way of punishment, but by way of enlightenment, to expand our understanding.⁷

At first glance, it may seem inconsistent that on the one hand justice, with its relentless law of consequences, and on the other, generosity or love, are both included in the meaning of the word **asha**. But the apparent inconsistency disappears when you think that the "bad" consequences of our wrongful choices are not punishments, but rather are a way of increasing our understanding and compassion, helping us to realize the divine within. So divine justice, which generates the law of consequences, is also an expression of love and generosity.

There is no **one** English word which accurately encompasses the meaning of **asha**. I use "truth" because that is the closest, and is also the word many scholars use. But when we read "truth" for **asha**, we should remember that it means a divine aspect, encompassing truth, what's right, goodness, compassion, lovingkindness, generosity as well as the laws that govern the spiritual and material worlds including that perfect justice which sets in motion the law of consequences.

Let us move on to **vahishta**.

In the Gathas, the divine is described in terms of seven characteristics:

Asha described above.

Vohu mano good thinking, or a good mind i.e. the comprehension of asha, or a mind that comprehends asha.

Spenta mainyu the spirit of asha,⁸

Spenta aramaiti embodying asha in thoughts, words and actions,⁹ i.e. realizing the divine through experience, which brings about the next aspect,

Vohu xshathra good rule. In the Gathas, it is also described as the rule of truth and good thinking (i.e. being governed by, and governing with, asha and vohu mano. This is sometimes called the kingdom of God. In the Gathas, the kingdom of God is within and also is created in the world by our aramaiti, our loving and truthful thoughts, words and actions of asha),

Haurvatat completeness, perfection. This occurs through the experience of thoughts, words and actions of asha. Completeness occurs both at an individual level, and also collectively, when all living things have perfected (or realized completely) the divine within. We can only be truly complete when we, and every living thing, is one with God, when all parts of the Whole make it.

Ameretat non-deathness. What occurs when completeness is attained.

In the later literature, these divine aspects were called amesha spenta, the divine immortals. Some people (but not Insler) translate "spenta" as increasing or expanding. If that is correct then the term means immortals who are expanding, increasing, growing i.e. as more of us attain them, the divine increases, grows.

In the Gathas, these divine aspects are objects of worship, and also how we worship. They describe the nature of God, the Word of God, the way to God and being one with God. So the divine and the way to the divine, are the same. The means and the end are the same.¹⁰

"Heaven" (the end) is not a place. In the Gathas, it is a state of being perfected through the experience of thoughts, words and actions of asha. It is being one with God. The bliss of rejoining the source. Heaven is described in the later literature as the "endless lights", (enlightenment?) and the "best existence."

I think it is neat that to Zarathushtra, God is not some perfect being separate and apart from us. God and all the living are part of the same "being", so what we call "God" is simply that part of the Whole that has already reached enlightenment (or perfection through understanding, choosing and experiencing asha). This means that God had to

choose too, that he had to earn "heaven" (that state of being that is divine) too. There is a remarkable verse in the Gathas which expresses this thought quite clearly.

"What prize Zarathushtra previously promised to his adherents -- into that House of Song [footnote: "Metaphor for heaven"¹¹] did the Wise Lord come as the first one. This prize has been promised to you during the times of salvation by reason of your good thinking and truth." (Y51.15).

With this understanding, let us consider vahishta.

Vahishta

Vahishta Vahishta literally means "best." In the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses the word in five ways:

1. Best (vahishta) is used to describe God and his divine aspects truth (asha), good thinking (the comprehension of asha), and good spirit¹².
2. Best (vahishta) is used to describe God's teachings¹³, which are truth (asha), good thinking and good spirit.
3. Best (vahishta) is used to describe words and actions of truth (asha), and good thinking,¹⁴ which come from good spirit (Y45.8).
- 4 Best (vahishta) is used to describe the reward for truth (asha) and good thinking,¹⁵ which comes from good spirit (Y47.5), and which is truth (asha) and good thinking (Y51.21, Y28.10).
5. Best (vahishta) is used to describe the best existence,²⁰ that state of being which is truth (asha) and good thinking (the comprehension of asha) -- paradise, salvation, which is truth (asha) and good thinking (Y51.20).

In the later literature, the "best existence" (clearly a state of being) is the term for the highest heaven -- the heaven above the "endless lights." And in Persian, the word behesht, is used as a synonym for heaven. Behesht is a later linguistic form of the Gathic word vahishta.

So in essence, vahishta is a short-hand word which Zarathushtra uses to describe the divine, the way to the divine, and becoming one with the divine (heaven, paradise, enlightenment, the state of being that is one with God, completeness).

Now if we factor our understanding of these words asha and vahishta into the Ashem Vohu prayer, this is what it would say:

Asha Asha (truth, goodness, rightness, lovingkindness, generosity, compassion, the natural laws both spiritual and material, the law of consequences etc.) is the best good (i.e., it is divine, the way to divinity, and the heaven of becoming one with the divine).

It can be attained by all who desire it

We should desire asha for the sake of the best asha.

In essence, the prayer is a recognition that asha is divine, is the way to divinity, and is becoming one with the divine - the best, vahishta. If desired or chosen the desire can be fulfilled. Desiring asha for its own best sake, is its own reward which is, the best asha -- pure divinity, the state of being which is paradise, the endless lights, enlightenment.

1. I. J. S. Taraporewala, The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra, page 23 ("Taraporewala" hereinafter), and also Khabardar (Taraporewala page xxxiii);
2. B. T. Anklesaria, F. K. Dadachanji, Dhalla, D. J. Irani, Kanga, Juan Mascaro, Mills, Spiegel, (as quoted in Taraporewala page xxxiii).
3. Haug, K. M. Talati (as quoted in Taraporewala page xxxiii).
4. Bartholomae (as quoted in Taraporewala page xxxiii). Insler also subscribes to this view.

5. To Zarathushtra the material world is not illusion. Nor is it evil. It is the temporary medium with which we have been provided to realize the divine -- an interesting paradox -- that we achieve the spiritual through the medium of the material. Thus the divine is brought to life, not only within ourselves, but also in our world.

6. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path ("right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration" Old Path White Clouds, page 121) is an accurate expression of asha in thought, word and action.

7. In the Gathas, each divine aspect is linked allegorically to something in the material world. I think this was Zarathushtra's way of illustrating that "God" exists in everything. Asha is linked to fire. In the Gathas, fire (asha's material counterpart) is sometimes described as the active agent of the law of consequences. I think this was Zarathushtra's way of illustrating that the law of consequences operates in the world of matter, i.e. in our material reality.

8. Described in the Gathas as "... the spirit virtuous through truth [asha]..." (Y28.1), and also as the spirit which chooses truth (Y30.5).

9. "But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth, and (our) enduring [aramaiti] gave body and breath (to it)....." (Y30.7). See also: "Virtuous is the man of [aramaiti]. He is so by reason of his understanding, his words, his action, his conception....." (Y51.21).

10. For the evidence from the Gathas on which this conclusion is based, see Of Means and Ends, World Zoroastrian Organization Gatha Colloquium, 1993.

11. "House of Song" and "House of Good Thinking" are two of the names for "heaven" which Zarathushtra uses. "House" in my view is a metaphor for state of being. Thus the "House of Song" describes a state of bliss, and the "House of Good Thinking" describes a state of wisdom. The evidence from the Gathas on which I base this conclusion is set forth in, A Question of Paradise, World Zoroastrian Organization Seminar, September 1991, pages 20 - 28.

12. Y28.8, 28.9, 33.7, 33.6.

13. Y30.2, 45.5, 48.3.

14. Y34.15, 47.2.

15. Y49.9, 47.5, 30.4.

16. In Y46.10, Zarathushtra describes what is "best for existence" as "truth (asha) for the truth and the rule of good thinking." In Y44.2 he links the "best existence" to salvation. And in Y51.20, he defines salvation as "truth (asha) allied with good thinking". In Y32.15-16 the "House of Good Thinking" (heaven) is specifically referred to as "This is equal to the best."

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Ahura Mazda

Zarathushtra's name for God is Ahura Mazda.

Inslar translates Ahura Mazda as Wise Lord.

The late and much loved dastur [high priest] Minochehr-Homji translates Ahura Mazda as Lord of Life and Wisdom.

Gershevitch translates "mazda" as creator or giver of thought ("da" meaning creator or giver).

Windfuhr translates Ahura Mazda as living wisdom.

I am not a linguist, so I have no way of evaluating these different linguistic views, other than how Zarathushtra uses the words. What follows is based on translations I find credible (mostly Inslar's), and on the way Zarathushtra uses these words in the Gathas, and in the Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayer (believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself).

Ahura. Assuming ahura means "lord", I question: "Lord" of what? "Lord" in what sense?

In the Gathas, the term *ahura* is used in four ways: First, it is used to describe God (Ahura Mazda). Second, it is used to refer to the aspects of divinity¹ which are metaphorically called "lords" (Y30.9, Y31.4). Third, it is used to describe God's mastery (or lordship) over the divine aspects.² Fourth, the words *ahura* (Y29.2, and Y31.10) and *ahu* (Y29.6) are used to refer to the person who is to be pastor of the good vision on this earth.³ And Zarathushtra was chosen for this task (Y29.8). If we accept that Zarathushtra became an enlightened soul, it would be reasonable to infer that an *ahura* is one who has mastered, and attained the power of, the divine forces (including non-deathness *ameretat* and therefore also has control (or lordship) over mortality).⁴

MazdaMazda. Wisdom, or Wise One⁵ I think wisdom is another word for enlightenment. It would be reasonable to infer from the evidence of the Gathas, that wisdom is attaining or realizing the divine through the experience of thoughts, words and actions of *asha*. So one who has wisdom is one who has attained or realized the seven aspects of divinity -- the **amesha spenta**.

Thus **ahura** and **mazda** are different ways of saying the same thing.

It is interesting that Zarathushtra's idea of the divine also includes the idea of being a "pastor". As with **ahura**, Zarathushtra uses "pastor" to refer to God, to the divine forces, and to the man who has these forces (whether in whole or in part).⁶ Therefore, being **ahura** and **mazda** includes not only having the power and wisdom of the divine forces for one's self, it also includes helping others to attain them, so they can reach completeness (**haurvatat**) as well. In other words, being **ahura** and **mazda** means to be enlightened oneself, and also help others to become enlightened. This corroborates Zarathushtra's idea that man and God are part of the same Whole. In the final analysis, there are no "others". If everyone doesn't make it, no one makes it.

This is not the conventional interpretation that has been given to the name **Ahura Mazda**. But this is how I see it (so far). As I gain knowledge, my views may change. That inevitably happens when studying the Gathas, because of the difficulties of translation, as well as the enigmatical way in which Zarathushtra camouflages his ideas which were light years ahead of what the average person could accept in that polytheistic culture, where gods were regarded as something apart -- fearsome, believed to be capable of wrecking tremendous harm, and therefore to be feared and appeased. Had Zarathushtra expressed his ideas directly, he doubtless would have been killed or ridiculed. As it is, he was persecuted and ostracized:

"To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee?

They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan.

The community with which I have associated has not satisfied me,

nor those who are the deceitful rulers of the land.

How then shall I satisfy Thee, Wise Lord?"⁷

(Y46.1)

".....I lament to Thee. Take notice of it, Lord [*ahura*],

offering the support which

a friend should grant to a friend....."⁸

(Y46.2).

1. Unspecified **amesha spenta**.

2. "... **the very Wise Master [ahurai] of good thinking.....**" (Y30.1); "...**Lord [ahurem] of the word and deed stemming from good spirit.....**" (Y45.8, accord Y51.3); "... **the Wise One in rule is Lord through [aramaiti]...**" (Y47.1); "...**the truthful Lord...**" (Y53.9).

3. Metaphorically referred to as pastor of the cow. The good vision is the vision of a world governed by truth and good thinking -- divine aspects. Therefore a master of the good vision would be one who has attained the power of (or mastery over) truth [asha] and good thinking [**vohu mano**].

4. The idea of attaining the power of the divine forces, and power over mortality is also suggested, though in different words, in the following 2 verses: "..... **When I could rule at will over my reward, then I would, exercising such power, be in the stride of the blessed one.**" (Y50.9). "Reward" in numerous places in the Gathas is truth [asha] and good thinking [**vohu mano**]. Y28.10, Y51.21). And in Y32.15 Zarathushtra refers to "...**those who rule over life at will in the House of Good Thinking.**"

5. I have found no evidence in the Gathas (at least in the Insler translation) that corroborates the idea that God is the giver or creator of thought (comprehending both good and bad thinking). But there is ample evidence that He is the father (Y31.8, 45.4), giver (Y30.7, 43.6, 50.6, 53.3, 53.4) and creator (Y43.2, 44.4, 51.21) of good thinking, and also the giver of wisdom (Y53.3).

6. In Yasna 29.1, "pastor" refers to God and his divine forces, truth [asha, good thinking and good spirit]. The soul of the good vision on earth [metaphorically referred to as the cow] cries to them for help, saying, "I have no pastor other than you. Therefore appear to me with good pasturage."

In Yasna 29.2 and 29.6 "pastor" and ahura are both used to refer to the man who will nurture the good vision on earth. And in Yasna 29.8, Zarathushtra is chosen by good thinking for the task. In Yasna 33.6 "pastoral duties" are mentioned in connection with a priest "who is just, in harmony with truth [asha] ... the offspring from the best spirit" (see also Y53.4). Other references are ambiguous and could refer to God, to his divine forces, and/or to the man who has them, or is committed to them (Y31.10, 31.15, 47.3, 51.5)

7. This last line reflects the idea that it is not enough to be wise and enlightened by one's self. To truly satisfy God, one has to bring the light to life as part of a community (not unlike the Buddha's idea of the sangha).

8. "Friend" is translated by some as "beloved".

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Yatha Ahu Vairyo

(also called the Ahuna Vairya)

Yatha ahu vairyo

atha ratush ashat chit hacha,

Vangheush dazda manangho

shyaothananam angheush Mazdai

xshathremcha Ahurai a

yim drigubyo dadat vastarem.

Translations of this prayer vary widely. The following is mostly from Insler's translation (square brackets indicate insertions by me, round parentheses are in Insler's original translation).

Just as the Lord [ahu] is to be chosen (in accordance with truth), [asha]

So also the judgment [ratush] [is to be chosen] in accordance with truth [asha].

As a result of this good thinking [vohu mano, the comprehension and choosing of asha]
establish the rule [xshathra] of actions stemming from an existence of good thinking
for the (sake of the) Wise One, and for the lord [ahura] whom they [the divine aspects] established as pastor for the
needy-dependents.

The Meaning of the Ahuna Vairya.

In the long history of Zoroastrianism, this prayer, the Ahuna vairya, has been regarded as something of a talisman, a very potent charm, capable of producing extraordinary effects. In the later literature it is written that Ahura Mazda said that:

"...this utterance is a thing of such a nature, that if all the corporeal and living world should learn it, and learning hold fast by it, they would be redeemed from their mortality!" Yasna 19 (not a part of the Gathas)¹

And a later text (written some time after the Arab invasion) describes it as a formula for defeating evil. This text states:

"...even so as is declared in revelation, that when one of its (the Ahuna Vairya's) three parts was uttered, the evil spirit contracted his body through fear, and when two parts of it were uttered, he fell upon his knees, and when all of it was uttered he became confounded and impotent as to the harm he caused the creatures of Ahuramazd....." Bundahishn.²

It is significant, that even after the devastation wrought by Alexander and by the later Arab invasion, the idea survived in what remained of the Zoroastrian community, that the Ahuna Vairya is something that not only enables us to transcend our mortality, as stated in Yasna 19, but also has the ability to defeat evil, as the Bundahishn states. A potent talisman indeed.

Naturally, one wonders: How? how does the Ahuna Vairya defeat evil? how does it help us to transcend our mortality?

To answer the first question (how does it defeat evil) we have to remember Zarathushtra's idea of "evil". It is the product of wrongful choices. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra describes evil as a primordial force. He does not specify its origins. But he says that in our existence, we bring it to life, we give it substance, we make it real, when we choose it with our thoughts, words and actions. Therefore, a key to the destruction of evil and the suffering it causes, is making the right choices, which brings us back to the Ahuna Vairya prayer -- the prayer of choices.

The Ahuna Vairya specifies three things that are to be chosen: the lord (ahu), the judgment (ratush), and the rule (xshathra).

[FIRST CHOICE] Just as the lord [ahu] is to be chosen, (in accord with truth) [asha]

[SECOND CHOICE] so also the judgment [ratush] in accord with truth, asha, [must be chosen]

[THIRD CHOICE] As a result of this good thinking,

establish the rule [xshathra] of actions stemming from an existence of good thinking,

for (the sake of) the Wise One, and for the lord whom they established as pastor for the needy-dependents.

First choice: What does Zarathushtra mean by choosing the Lord in accord with truth? To understand the significance of this choice, we have to think back to Zarathushtra's time period.

Today, we are used to thinking in terms of a benevolent monotheism. But the situation was very different for Zarathushtra. We know from the Gathas that the society in which he lived was corrupt and oppressive. He complains of greedy princes, a thieving aristocracy, and pleasure loving priests who, seduced by power and wealth,

"...chose the rule of tyrants and deceit rather than truth [asha]." (Y32.12).

These tyrants and priests used fear to promote the worship of many gods, some of whom Zarathushtra describes as "fierce" and "hateful". And Zarathushtra made a choice. He not only spoke out against these fierce and hateful gods, he demoted them from godhood (that took guts). He concluded that only pure goodness could lay claim to divinity. He described the attributes of divinity as seven divine forces or aspects (later called the amesha spenta):

* asha,

* spenta mainyu the spirit which derives its character from asha,

* vohu mano, good thinking, which is understanding and choosing asha,

* spenta aramaiti, the realization of asha through the experience of thoughts, words and actions, which creates

* vohu xshathra, good rule, the rule of truth and good thinking, and leads to

* haurvatat, completeness and

* ameretat, non-deathness.

In other words, the first choice of the Ahuna Vairya requires that we choose the object of our worship (the lord) in accordance with truth, asha.

Although the pantheon of local gods whom Zarathushtra had to contend with are not around today, the first choice of the Ahuna Vairya is still relevant to us. Like our remote ancestors, we too worship many gods, just different ones - money, power, prestige, appearances, position. By Zarathushtra's standards, such gods are not worthy of worship. We need to choose what we worship "in accord with truth (asha)."

The Second Choice: is "the judgment in accord with truth" which is good thinking (vohu mano), understanding asha and making our choices in accordance with that understanding. Good thinking is the key to accessing the divine. And Zarathushtra requires that we think for ourselves -- not blindly accept what others may tell us.³

The Third Choice: is choosing to establish, or bring to life, the rule (xshathra) of "actions stemming from an existence of good thinking," which, in my view, is the concept of aramaiti, although not mentioned by name.

The importance of this third choice -- actions stemming from an existence of good thinking -- is reflected in Zarathushtra's view of what it takes to be a saoshyant -- a savior, a redeemer.

In the later literature, the concept of a saoshyant became greatly embroidered and exaggerated to the point of elevating saoshyant to the status of a miraculous messiah of great power who will be victorious over evil, and make everything all right. We are not much different today. Whether its Superman, or Yoder, or other omniscient aliens with miraculous powers from another star system, we too hunger for a leader with magical powers who will make everything turn out all right.

This view of the saoshyant you will not find in the Gathas. There is no one savior with magical powers who will come to fix things for us. We have to fix things for ourselves, with God's help, and with the help of each other. According to Zarathushtra, each individual is a potential saoshyant -- a potential redeemer or savior. In the Gathas he asks:

"...which men shall stop the cruelty (caused) by the violent deceitful persons? To which man shall come the understanding stemming from good thinking?" (Y48.11).

And he concludes:

"Yes, those men shall be the saviors [saoshyanto] of the lands, namely, those who shall follow their knowledge of Thy teaching with actions in harmony with good thinking and with truth [asha], Wise One. These indeed have been fated to be the expellers of fury." (The Gathas Y48.12).

In other words, "actions in harmony with good thinking and truth," bring the divine to life, not only in our spirits, but also in our world and so establish good rule (vohu xshathra). To Zarathushtra, the material and the spiritual are inextricably linked -- each necessary to bring about the desired end. Thoughts, words and actions of asha (the

material embodying the spiritual) are the means by which we achieve the desired end (the best asha -- a spiritual state of being). Thus the purpose of life -- to realize the divine -- is achieved in both worlds, in the world of mind/spirit, as well as in the world of matter. If we follow this formula, this world would indeed be heaven on earth and the suffering caused by wrongful choices would cease to exist.

We can summarize the talismanic virtues of the Ahuna Vairya as a formula for defeating evil and the suffering it causes, quite simply: When we create light, the darkness ceases to exist. We create light by bringing the divine to life with our choices -- our choices of who and what we worship, our choices in thought and action stemming from an understanding of asha. When we stop choosing evil, we deprive it of substance. It becomes impotent, unable to cause suffering, or unable to harm, as the Bundahishn tells us.

But what of the promise of Yasna 19, that if we learn the Ahuna Vairya, and learning, hold fast by it, we will transcend our mortality.

In Zoroastrian lore, which is highly metaphoric, we are told that the Chinvat Bridge (the bridge of the Separator, or the Bridge of the Judge⁴) stretches from the material to the spiritual. I take the imagery of the bridge to represent (metaphorically) a transition from the material to the spiritual. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra tells Ahura Mazda that he will cross over this bridge, in the company of the divine forces ("in the glory of your kind"), with each man and woman who gives him "truth for the truth, and the rule of good thinking." (Y46.10).

This Gathic verse echoes the Ahuna Vairya formula that we must choose the divine in our understanding, and in our actions. When we do so it becomes a part of us (or we become a part of it), and we make the transition, (we cross over the bridge) from mortality to the spiritual state (non-deathness, ameretat), or as the author of the later Yasna 19 puts it, we are redeemed from our mortality.

This brings us to the last line of the Ahuna Vairya, that we establish the rule of actions stemming from an existence of good thinking, "for the sake of the Wise One [mazda], and for the lord [ahura] whom they established as pastor for the needy-dependents".

In the last line of the last Gatha (Y53.9), Ahura Mazda is described as the one who grants what is very good (i.e. the "best") to his needy dependent who lives honestly.⁵ In the second Gatha, Yasna 29, it is Zarathushtra who is chosen by the divine aspects (asha, good thinking and good spirit) to be the pastor.

The last line of the Ahuna Vairya seems to combine these two thoughts "for the sake of the Wise One [mazda], and for the lord [ahura] whom they [the divine aspects] established as pastor for the needy-dependents". At one level, mazda may refer to God and ahura to Zarathushtra, the enlightened man. At another level, (if my understanding is correct) mazda and ahura may refer to two parts of the same Whole.

So the last line of the Ahuna Vairya says that we establish the rule of the divine,⁶ for the sake of the divine (mazda and ahura), who in turn nurture those who have not yet made it -- the needy-dependents. That is how we defeat evil. That is how we (individually and collectively) transcend our mortality.

One last thought. The last line of the Yatha Ahu Vairyo exquisitely complements the last line of the Ashem Vohu.

In the Ashem Vohu we desire the divine (asha) for the sake of the divine as concept -- the best asha (vahishtai ashem).

In the Yatha Ahu Vairyo we choose to realize the divine (actions stemming from a comprehension of asha), for the sake of the divine as being -- mazda and ahura.

1. Yasna 19, verse 10, as translated by Mills, in Sacred Books of the East, ("SBE") Volume 31, pages 262-263 (Motilal Banarsidas reprint).

2. The Bundahishn, a later Pahlavi text, as translated by E. W. West in SBE Volume 5, Chapter 1, verse 22, pages 8-9.

3. "Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind -- man by man for himself....." (Y30.2); "... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth. Truth, shall I see thee as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord?....." (Y28.4-5). Indeed, even when asking for God's guidance,

Zarathushtra asks that it be given through good thinking, not by something that must be blindly obeyed. "...instruct through good thinking (the course) of my direction, in order to be the charioteer of my will and my tongue." (Y50.6).

4. Where each person judges himself/herself.

5. In Y34.5 Zarathushtra describes himself as the "needy dependent" of Ahura Mazda He asks if Ahura Mazda has the power to protect "your needy dependent -- as I indeed am -- with truth and good thinking...." Clearly, he was not born perfected or enlightened. It was something he attained through thoughts, words and actions of asha.

6. i.e. actions stemming from an existence of good thinking (vohu mano, understanding and choosing asha).

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Yenghe Haataam

Yenghe haataam aat yasne paiti vangho
Mazda Ahuro vaetha ashat hacha yaongham cha
tas cha taos cha yazamaide.

Of those beings whose act of worship
Ahura Mazda knows is better
in accordance with asha,
Them all, both male and female, do we revere.

In the Gathas, there is a very lovely verse which reads as follows:

"I know in whose worship
there exists for me the best
in accordance with truth [asha].
It is the Wise Lord
as well as those who have existed and (still) exist
[i.e. God's immortal aspects, or forces, the amesha spenta]
Them (all) shall I worship
with their own names

[Insler's footnote: "That is, I shall worship truth with truth, good thinking with good thinking, etc"]

and I shall serve them with love." (The Gathas, Y51.22).

The idea here is that we worship God, and each divine aspect or force with its own name and serve it with love -- i.e. we worship truth, by being truthful and serving it with love, we worship good thinking with good thinking and serve it with love, et cetera. (As Ahura Mazda himself is mentioned with the amesha spenta, I would add, we worship Ahura Mazda with his own name -- by being ahura and mazda -- and serving with love).

There is a reflection of this verse in a later Avestan text (not a part of the Gathas) which states: "I will worship those who (are) the amesha spenta and I will approach them with love."¹

Now comes the interesting part.

It is generally believed that this Gathic verse (Y51.22) was the basis for the Yenghe Haataam prayer. And the earliest commentary on the Yenghe Haataam prayer² states that it is addressed to the amesha spenta, the divine aspects (three of which, incidentally, happen to be female nouns -- aramaiti, haurvatat and ameretat).

However, there is an equally well entrenched tradition that the Yenghe Haataam is a statement that we revere all good men and women whose daily actions God knows are acts of worship -- done in accordance with asha, and we serve them with love.

A good friend of mine, who is a Zoroastrian priest, Kersey Antia, suggests that the Yenghe Haataam prayer is deliberately ambiguous and stands for the proposition that we revere the divine aspects (the amesha spenta) as well as those persons who attain them (whether completely, or in whatever degree), thus reconciling both conflicting views. Based on my reading of the later commentary (in Y21), I think he is right.

If we meditate on the double meanings of this prayer, while keeping in mind its Gathic source, we see different dimensions of the same thought, blending into and out of each other: -- revering the divine both in concept (the amesha spenta) and in being (those who have realized them),³ both of whose acts of worship [truth with truth, etc.] is better i.e. approaching the best, as Zarathushtra defines the best, which is the nature of God, the Word of God, the Way to God and being one with God. And most important of all -- serving both concepts and beings, with love -- love being the foundation of our worship.

In the varied circumstances of our lives, if we could remember to so worship the divine in concept and in each other, with love, what a joyful world this would be. Hatred and violence would be unthinkable.

Zarathushtra taught that the relationship between man and 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, or a beloved to a beloved. I like the idea that God is my Beloved Friend. But logic requires that we take the next step. If our Beloved Friend lives in each one of us, are we not all part of the same Whole? Can we harm any person without harming Him and ourselves?

And when we all realize this, will the world (and we ourselves) be renewed (frashokereti)? With the help of asha, and each other, it will happen.

1. Humbach, The Gathas of Zarathushtra, Part II, page 236, quoting from Yasna 70.1.
2. Yasna 21, SBE Volume 31, page 269, (Motilal Benarsidas reprint).
3. A reflection of the last lines of the Ashem Vohu and Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayers.

In Search Of

Beloved,
I search for Your Face.
In the moving lights and darks of earth and space,
I search for Your Face.
I stretch my mind to grasp at the thought of Thee,
Grasp, as You move and breathe in all around me,
And find in my grasp,
Wisps of eternity elusive
In the silent rhapsody of the universe,
In tree, and sky, and star, and sand,
I feel your Hand.
In a loving heart,
In a truthful mind,
In an act of grace,
I see Your Face,
Beloved.