

D G McIntyre - Harmony in Paradox - Part II: The Paradox of the Individual and the Community

One of the unique things about Zarathushtra's theology is that he does not give us fact specific answers. Instead, he gives us a system, a method, a way of living and solving our problems. I would like to show you how this system plays out in one of the many paradoxes of the Gathas. The paradox of the individual and the community.

We all know that a core teaching of Zarathushtra is individual responsibility. Have you ever wondered how this affects community well being? Is there a conflict here? Let us consider first, the Individual aspect of this paradox.

Zarathushtra's notion of individual responsibility includes five components.

First, we must think. This is unusual. Most religious authorities consider obedience to be a higher priority. But not Zarathushtra. His priority is that we think. In fact, he considers good thinking (vohu mano) to be an attribute of the Divine, that man can also attain.

Second, he tells us we must think individually – each person for himself. This also is unusual. Most religions require obedience to some central human authority. But not Zarathushtra. He tells us

“..... Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself...” Y30.2.[i]

Does this mean that Zarathushtra is indifferent to community well-being? Not at all, as we shall see. His notion of how to nurture and create community is just different from the authoritarian view.

One of the challenges for our Zarathushti community today, surely, is to find a way of implementing this teaching of independent thought, within the institutional framework of our religion. In so doing, we need to be aware that obeying some central human authority does not necessarily create community. It simply substitutes another human being's thinking for our own.

The concept of “obedience” does indeed exist in Zarathushtra's thought – “sraosha”. But this is not a blind obedience. It is a thinking obedience. When applying it to human authority, Zarathushtra says:

“.....As world-healer, promise us a judge [ratum[iii]], and let obedience to him come through good thinking.....” Y44.16.

Even obedience to the Wise Lord is a thinking obedience. In fact, Zarathushtra suggests that the Wise Lord instructs, helps, and promotes the desired end, through good thinking – His mind to ours.

“.....instruct through good thinking (the course) of my direction, in order to be the charioteer of my will and my tongue.” Y50.6.

“..... What help by good thinking hast Thou for me? ...” Y49.12.

“.....Through good thinking the Creator of existence shall promote the true realization of what is most healing according to our wish.” Y50.11.

The third component of Zarathushtra's notion of individual responsibility is the freedom to choose. Each thought, word and action involves making a choice. Even the failure to choose is a choice.[iii]

The fourth component involves how we make our choices. The Zarathushti commitment is to choose what is true and right (asha), for its own sake, as the Gathas and our Ashem vohu prayer tell us. Not out of fear of punishment like the conventional notion of hell. And not because we want a reward like the conventional notion of heaven. But to bring about what is true and right, (asha), for its own sake. When we do so, we bring ourselves, and our communities -- our world -- into harmony with asha, with what is true and right, with the ideal order of things.

Look at any human endeavor – medicine, technology, science, literature, law, whatever – and you see the validity of Zarathushtra's thought. It is the creative diversity and intelligence of individuals, free to think for themselves, that generate the solutions to the many problems that form a natural part of our reality. It is the many good choices, made by many individuals, that generate community well being.

How often do we hear the seductive voice of false arguments which seek to persuade us to give up our freedom to think for ourselves, and make our own choices, for the so-called good of the community.

Imagine yourself as an auditor for Enron, in the last few years of Enron's existence, being told: "you cannot expose the financial wrongdoings of management – it would destroy the company, throw thousands of people out of work, destroy the savings of hundreds of thousands of shareholders, to say nothing of losing us our biggest client." Did covering up for Enron's management save jobs, or save its shareholders, or keep the auditing company from losing its biggest client? We all know it did not. But if the auditors had refused to give their seal of approval, right at the beginning, the problem would not have grown to such huge proportions, and it might have saved the employees, the shareholders, the company itself, and its auditors.

In the same way, in the Zarathushti community, sometimes community leaders issue edicts that we believe to be wrong. And there are those in the community who tell us that we have an obligation to obey these edicts "for the good of the community". But can it ever benefit a community to perpetuate what is wrong?

I don't ask you to take my word for it. I ask only that you think about it. Do you believe in Zarathushtra's system? Does it make sense to you? Is it validated by experience?

Finally, the fifth component of individual responsibility is the law of consequences, that we experience the consequences of our choices, that what we do comes back to us – the good choices and the bad choices – all come back to us, not for punishment, but as a learning mechanism, to increase our understanding. If we make choices that turn out to be mistakes, that is a normal part of the learning process. The lessons are sometimes painful. But they increase understanding (vohu mano).

To summarize: Zarathushtra's system of individual responsibility and community well being involves thinking for ourselves, using our minds to figure out what is true and right, making good choices with each thought, word and action, and experiencing the consequences for our choices, as an on-going learning process, which makes us grow as individuals. And by the same token, it is impossible to think a good thought, speak good word or do a good action without benefiting the people and circumstances that are affected by them – our communities, our world.

There is another dimension to this paradox of the Individual and the Community, which I would like to touch upon.

We are all familiar with the teaching of the immanence of the Wise Lord in all things. In other words, that His Life Force exists in all things. This is implied throughout the Gathas, and is expressed in the later texts using the metaphor of fire. For example, the unknown author of Yasna 17, (a later Avestan text), refers to fire metaphorically, expressing the belief that everything has the divine fire within it – man, animals, trees, plants, the clouds, the world itself. An idea that we also find in the Bundahishn. This is a poetic way of expressing the idea that His Life Force is immanent, (present), in all things.

The Gathas show us this thought in multi-dimensional perspectives, one of which is the concept of haurvatat – completeness, perfection.

Completeness (haurvatat) is an attribute of the Wise Lord Himself. Zarathushtra speaks of:

"...His completeness [haurvatat] ..." Y31.6.

Yet it is something that we can earn. He says:

"...Those of you who shall give obedience [seraoshem] and regard to this (Lord) of mine, they shall reach completeness" Y45:5.

The Wise Lord gives completeness to us:

"...grant Thou to me ... completeness," Y51.7.

And, most interesting of all, we give completeness to the Wise Lord:

"Yes, both completeness and immortality are for Thy sustenance. Together with the rule of good thinking allied with truth, (our) [aramaiti] has increased these two enduring powers (for Thee)....." Y34.11.

You well may ask: how could we possibly give completeness to the Wise Lord? How do we complete what is already complete? Isn't He above needing anything that we can give Him? No indeed. This too is a beautiful part of Zarathushtra's thought – a mutual benefiting, a mutual completing, of man and "God", and man and man, and all the living. For if He is immanent (present) in all things, then although at an individual level, He is complete, perfect, He cannot attain ultimate completeness until everything of which He is a part has attained that same state of completeness, perfection.

Thus we see that "completeness" (haurvatat) is attained both at an individual, and eventually, at a collective level. The ultimate paradox; giving an added dimension to the meaning of community, in that an individual is not truly complete, until all the living arrive at that same state of being.

Once we understand this thought, it becomes apparent that although a given individual may perfect himself or herself, we cannot reach ultimate completeness until everyone does. It makes us appreciate that it is not enough for an individual to attain haurvatat for himself. We have to help each other make it. If I don't make it, you don't make it. If you are diminished, I am diminished. If any part of this whole is trashed, we are all trashed.

It is a paradox indeed, that in searching for God, Zarathushtra discovers the brotherhood of man, and the unity of all things.

If we keep this understanding in our minds when making our choices, and if we implement this understanding in our communities, it will enable us to meet the challenge of being true to Zarathushtra's teaching of individual responsibility, in a way that builds well-being in the many communities of which we are a part.

Thus we see the paradox of the individual and the community resolves itself into the harmony of a beneficent existence.

[i] All quotations from the Gathas in this paper are from the translation of Professor Insler in **The Gathas of Zarathushtra**, (Brill 1975), 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 and indicate an insertion by Professor Insler, usually to aid understanding. Square brackets [] indicate an insertion by me. Such insertions by me are provided to show you applicable Gathic words (although not with their grammatical variations) or 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.

[ii] Insler translates "ratum" as "judge". Taraporewala translates the word as "Teacher". See **The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra**, by I. J. S. Taraporewala, page 513.

[iii] As James K. Lovelace pointed out in his essay: Reality and Response, which appears in **An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathushtra**, Issue No. 10, and which may be viewed on Shahriar Shahriari's website www.zarathushtra.com