

## DG McIntyre - Seven Gems from the Later Literature

These days it seems we often get into debates about the differences between the Gathas and the later literature. It is true that there are many differences. But sometimes, when reading the later literature, I come across some very lovely things – little gems that sparkle with a touch of the divine. I would like to give you seven of these gems tonight.

The first gem is in the Dibacheh of the Afringan ceremony. Now honesty requires me to tell you that I do not know, nor do I pray, the Afringan, or its Dibacheh. I came across this first little gem in Jivanji Jamshedji Modi's book explaining religious ceremonies. According to Modi, the word "afringan" comes from the root "fri", to love, to praise.<sup>1</sup> Modi tells us that the Dibacheh is the first part of the Afringan ceremony, and literally means "Preface".<sup>2</sup> Modi says that according to this Dibacheh, when we pray, we don't pray just for ourselves. We pray for all the living. In this Dibacheh, the following words are recited:

"Pa ganj-i-Dadar Ahura Mazda rayomand khorehmand Ameshaspand beresad." (Modi page 359).

Specifically, with these words, we ask that our prayers go into the treasury ("ganj") of Ahura Mazda, and His glorious aspects, the amesha spenta, so that from this treasury, they may be distributed to all who need the benefit of our prayers. Thus the prayers of each worshipper spread an influence far and wide, to all the living. I rather like the idea of sending my prayers into God's treasury for distribution to those who need prayers. But even more, I have somehow become hooked by this idea of praying, not just for myself, but for all the living. I have found that it is impossible to hate someone if he is included in my prayers. So this little gem in the Dibacheh of the Afringan, even though I don't pray the Afringan, has been a very healing influence in my life – encouraging generosity and dissolving hatred.

The next little gem appears in the Hormuzd Yasht. It doesn't tug at my heart-strings the way the Dibacheh of the Afringan does, but it pleases the mind, because it sheds light on an important theological dispute. We are all familiar with the debate about the amesha spenta. Some of us argue that they are separate and distinct beings. Others contend that Ahura Mazda is the personification of these attributes, that they are His divine aspects. In terms of understanding our religion, this issue is more than a little squabble. It goes to the very heart of Zarathushtra's teachings, because Zarathushtra put forward the profound but simple truth that Mazda's divine attributes, and the way to Mazda, are one and the same. There is a verse in the Hormuzd Yasht which corroborates the idea that the amesha spenta are both a part of Ahura Mazda, and the path of choice. In this verse, Zarathushtra supposedly asks Ahura Mazda questions, and Ahura Mazda supposedly answers. Here are the questions and the answer:

"What.....Holy Word is the strongest? ..... the most glorious?.....the best healing?.....What destroys best the malice of Daevas and Men?.....What makes the material world best come to the fulfillment of its wishes?.....What frees the material world best from the anxieties of the heart?' Ahura Mazda answered: 'Our Name, O Spitama Zarathushtra! who are the Amesha-Spentas.....' " Ormazd Yasht, verses 1 through 3, Sacred Books of the East, Volume 23, pages 23 – 24, translated by James Darmesteter (Motilal Banarsidas reprint).

If you study this verse carefully, you will see that the amesha spenta are described by the unknown author of this Yasht, not only as Ahura Mazda's name, -- a way of calling Him – but also as the best path.

The third gem appears in Yasna 60. This is a part of the Avesta, but not a part of the Gathas, and it relates to the idea we have just been discussing – that Ahura Mazda's attributes and the path to Him are one and the same. If you carry this idea to its logical conclusion, it becomes clear that the objective of this path is to reach God, to become one with God. Not everyone agrees with this understanding, so it was a source of some delight to me to see this idea expressed directly in a little gem of a prayer in Yasna 60 verse 12. Paraphrasing Taraporewala's translation, it goes as follows:

"Through the best asha,  
Through the highest asha,  
May we catch sight of Thee,  
May we approach Thee,  
May we be in perfect union with Thee." Y60.12.3

Notice the three steps which are accomplished through the best asha – first “may we catch sight of Thee” that is, having a clear perception or understanding. Second, “May we approach Thee” that is, following the path of asha to God. And third, “May we be in perfect union with Thee” -- the end result of understanding, and following the path.

The fourth gem is a phrase for paradise that appears in an early Avestan text called the Yasht fragment #22.<sup>4</sup> It describes paradise as “the Endless Lights”. It explains that paradise occurs in four steps as follows:

“The first step.....placed him in the Good-Thought Paradise;  
The second step.....placed him in the Good-Word Paradise;  
The third step.....placed him in the Good-Deed Paradise;  
The fourth step.....placed him in the Endless Lights.” 5 (as translated by James Darmesteter).

A lovely term for heaven, “the Endless Lights”. It shows that the unknown author of this Yasht understood Zarathushtra’s use of metaphor. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra links each divine attribute with a material counterpart, which he then uses in a metaphoric way. Asha is linked with fire and light. The more full of asha a person becomes, the more light filled she becomes. We see this in ancient Persian art, where angels and holy persons often are painted with flames or light, radiating out of their heads, an idea that may later have found expression in the halos of Christian paintings. This idea, that the more a person becomes filled with asha, the more light filled he becomes, also explains Porphyry’s statement describing Ahura Mazda as follows: “the body of Oromazdes is like light and his soul like truth.”<sup>6</sup> Now if you put this idea together with the idea that to Zarathushtra heaven is a state of being that is pure goodness, pure asha, you begin to appreciate the true beauty of the description of heaven as the Endless Lights, -- a state in which souls have become pure light, in endless numbers.

The fifth and sixth gems are from the sixth book of the Dinkard, and from the Zoroastrian wedding ceremony. Together, they reflect the light of a Gathic teaching that some of us have forgotten. Today, we tend to think of our religion as primarily an intellectual religion, emphasizing the mind. And it is true, that one of the things that makes our religion unique in the history of religions, is that it encourages us to use our minds, to think for ourselves. But it is only when you study the Gathas in depth, that you become aware that lovingkindness, generosity, are at the very heart of our religion as taught by Zarathushtra. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra prays with love,<sup>7</sup> he worships with love.<sup>8</sup> He introduces us to the concept of beneficence. . . According to Webster’s dictionary (2d edition) “beneficence” means “...active goodness, kindness, charity; bounty springing from purity and goodness.” Zarathushtra tells us that it is the beneficent person who makes the right choices “...the beneficent have correctly chosen.....” Y30 verse 3. He prays to Ahura Mazda: “...let salvation be granted to the beneficent man...” Y34.3 (defining “salvation” as truth and good thinking Y51.20). He calls the “loving man” Mazda’s ally in spirit. He says:

“...For such a person, virtuous through truth, watching over the heritage  
for all, is a world healer and Thy ally in spirit, Wise One.” Y44.2.

He specifically tells us that beneficence is included within the meaning of asha, and as such, is an attribute of Ahura Mazda himself. He describes Ahura as:

“...the Lord, beneficent through truth [asha], virtuous and knowing...” Y48.3.

So you see, beneficence, generosity, lovingkindness, is a fundament of our religion, a part of asha, an attribute of the Ahura Mazda himself, and also of the person who is a world healer and Mazda’s ally in spirit.

This Gathic teaching is reflected in two little gems from the Dinkard and from the Zoroastrian Wedding ceremony. In the sixth book of the Dinkard, written more than 1,000 years after Zarathushtra, but which is said to be a collection of the sayings of ancient Zoroastrian sages, it is written, not once, but in two separate places that the law of Ohrmazd is love of mankind.<sup>9</sup>

These words are also found in the Zoroastrian Wedding Ceremony. In a part of this ceremony, the priest gives the bride and groom advice on how to live their lives in accordance with the teachings of the religion.<sup>10</sup> Among other things, the priest says (as translated by Shahin Bekhradnia):

“.....worship God by doing charitable works. ....”

“..... The law of the Wise Lord, the Omnipotent, ..... is the law of loving mankind. So do not harm people neither in thought nor word nor deed. When a stranger arrives, give him food and shelter. Protect good people from hunger and thirst, from cold and heat. Be kindly to those under you or younger than you. Respect your elders, ..... so that the Wise Lord will delight in you.”

The seventh and last gem is a particular favorite of mine. It is the practice of the “hamaazor” gesture. This occurs not only in certain religious ceremonies, like the jashan, but according to Jivanji Modi, in the olden days it was also practiced as a kind of greeting by members of the community, when they met together on good occasions. The hamaazor gesture involves putting one person’s hands inside the other’s and then outside the other’s. In other words, each person both holds the other person’s hands and is held by the other person’s hands in turn. Do you see what this implies? It implies a friendly equality. Neither person has a controlling or upper hand over the other.

In the jashan ceremony, there is a part where the priests do this hamaazor gesture and say “hamaazor, hamaa asho béd” According to Kersey Antia, High Priest of the Chicago Zoroastrian Association, this phrase means: "Let us join together, let us be one with asha." Notice, this is a double joining: -- a joining with each other, and a joining with asha, which is truth, goodness, beneficence, what's right.

In the Gathas, the relationship between Ahura Mazda and man is described as that of a friend to a friend, or a beloved to a beloved. I cannot think of a more perfect definition of true friendship than this hamaazor gesture and its accompanying phrase: “hamaazor, hamaa asho béd” – that we join with each other, and with asha.

Wouldn’t it be neat to start all of our functions with this ashavan gesture of friendship, with everyone around us, as ancient Zarathushtis once did? What a great way to remind ourselves that, just as God is Friends with us, we must be friends with each other. We need to adapt ancient traditions that are beautiful, to our own times – make them living traditions. And what better time to rejuvenate an old tradition than around Noruz.

I invite you to start a new tradition tonight, from the roots of this ancient hamaazor greeting. But just as Zarathushtra prayed to Ahura Mazda in the language of his day, perhaps you may wish to do the hamaazor greeting in the language of our day. Please turn to the person on your right, on your left, in front of you, behind you, and any one else you can conveniently reach. With each such person, please join hands and say "friendship in asha" or if you prefer, “hamaazor, hamaa asho béd.”

#### **Footnotes:**

1. J. J. Modi, The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees, page 354. (Reprint of the 2d edition, 1986). The first edition came out in 1922. This reprint will hereinafter be referred to as “Modi”.

2. Modi page 355. He says that the Afringan is divided into three parts: (1) The Pazend Dibacheh, (2) the Afringan proper in the Avestan language, and (3) the Pazand Afrin, page 355.

3. Taraporewala’s exact translation is as follows:

“Through the best Righteousness,  
Through the highest Righteousness,  
May we catch sight of Thee,  
May we approach Thee,  
May we be in perfect union with Thee.” Y60.12.

Taraporewala, A Few Daily Prayers from the Zoroastrian Scriptures, (4th edition, Hukhta Foundation) page 3.

4. Sacred Books of the East (“SBE”), Volume 23, where Darmesteter writes: “These two Yasts or Yast fragments are known among the Parsis as the Hadokht Nask, though their context does not correspond to any part of the description of that Nask as given in the Dinkart.” p. 311 (Motilal Benarsidas reprint, 1981).

5. SBE, Volume 23, Yasht Fragment XXII, verse 15, page 317.

6. Moulton, Early Zoroastrianism, page 67, (AMS Press reprint).

7. "Thee.....do I lovingly entreat for the best for Frashaoshtra....." Y28.8. All quotations from, and references to, the Gathas in this paper are to the Insler translation, as it appears in The Gathas of Zarathushtra, (Brill 1975).

8. "I know in whose worship there exists for me the best in accordance with truth. It is the Wise Lord as well as those who have existed and (still) exist [i.e. God's immortal aspects or forces]. Them (all) shall I worship with their own names [i.e. truth with truth, good thinking with good thinking, etc] and I shall serve them with love." Y51.22.

9. "114. ....The law of Ohrmazd is love of man; ...."

"E45h.....The law of Ohrmaz is love of people."

Wisdom of the Sassanian Sages, translated by Shaul Shaked, pages 47, and 215 respectively (Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1979).

10. Unfortunately, by the time the Wedding Ceremony now in use was written, Zarathushtra's own beautiful words of advice to brides and grooms on the occasion of his daughter's wedding had long since become unknown to our priests. In Yasna 53.5 Zarathushtra tells his daughter and the other brides and grooms who were getting married:

".....Let each of you try to win the other with truth [asha] for this shall be of good gain for each." Insler translation (Y53.5).

or:

".....Let each of you try to win the other with truth [asha, truth, goodness, love] and you will both be winners." McIntyre paraphrase of Insler translation (Y53.5).