

Core Principles of Zarathushti Life – Doctrinal Aspects.

Talk prepared by Khushroo Mirza to be presented at the N.A.M.C. conference on July 30, 2005.

Good morning and thank you all for being here.

When I first began to work on this talk, I wrote down some of the major doctrinal aspects of our religion and then I found myself totally bogged-down in a quicksand of academic material. Then, when I was discussing it with our son, he asked me how any of this stuff applied to the way we lived. This led me to think about my life in India, specifically in the Dadar Parsi colony, where I grew up. There, surrounded by Zarathushtis, one did not have to think consciously about doctrine, or even try to connect it to one's daily life. We learned to live our religion through a process of osmosis.

When we woke up in the morning, we would see the servant sweeping and mopping the floors of our house. The sight of our mother and aunts covering their heads with mathu-banoos was taken by us as a matter of course. It was only in later years when they stopped wearing them that we felt something had changed.

We performed kusti padyab without being ordered. We went to a catholic school, and during mass, we Zarathushtis covered our heads with our hands and said Yatha ahu vairyo and Ashem vohu prayers. When we returned home in the evening, we bathed, and at sunset our mother would do the loban which filled the house with fragrance. Before going to meet our gang, we would drop in on the agiary, say a few select prayers and be on our way.

On special days such as birthdays, Pateti, Navroz etc..., the house would be decorated with floral garlands and pretty chalk designs. We would put on new clothes and go to the agiary. Later we would make the rounds visiting our elders. In those days Navroz was a bank holiday in Bombay, a fact that we took for granted.

I can still remember going with our family to the beach to pray for the avan adar nu parabh, and offering coconuts to the sea.

We learned to respect fire, not just in the agiary, but in every walk of our lives. We never put out a flame by blowing on it. Mind you, this practice has almost disappeared with the adopting of the western custom of blowing out birthday candles on cakes.

Whenever we came home after a haircut, we would go straight for a bath without making contact with any one, as loose hair was considered unclean. So were cut nails, therefore we never trimmed our nails in the house or let them fall on the ground. We were taught to be kind to animals. When we visited our grandmother's house in Jamnagar, I remember saving fruit peels in order to feed them to the goats that roamed around beyond our compound gates. We did not have a fridge, so it was a natural act to give any left over food to beggars after the last meal of the day.

So what does all this have to do with the core principles of Zarathushti life?

At its core the Zarathushti religion is Reflective not Prescriptive. The teachings of Asho Zarathushtra are not intended to be used literally, as a manual of rules by which one conducts daily life. Rather, they are a collection of aspirations and principles that operate in the subconscious and can have an impact on our daily life decisions.

A large part of the doctrinal aspects of Zarathushti life is very aptly summed up by Professor Irach Taraporewala in his book “The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra” when he discusses the Ahuna Vairya prayer: “This sacred verse clearly indicates the Three Paths to God – the Path of Knowledge, the Path of Love and the Path of Service.”

In order to understand this statement, let us look at the meaning of the prayer as given by Prof. Taraporewala:

“Just as the Temporal lord is all-powerful, so also is the Spiritual Teacher by virtue of his store of Asha (Righteousness). The gift of Vohu Mano is bestowed upon him who works for Ahura Mazda, and the Kshathra (power) of Ahura Mazda descends upon him who helps the poor and needy.”

The essence of this message has been absorbed by Zarathushtis for generations through the good examples set by elders. Our forefathers have demonstrated this in practical terms, by building schools to foster knowledge, by inculcating the value of truth and righteousness in their offspring until it becomes a second nature and by establishing charitable organizations to help the poor and needy.

The importance given to righteousness by ancient Zarathushtis can be seen through Herodotus, who records that among the Persians of the fifth century B.C., it was usual for boys of the noble or warrior class to begin their training at the age of five, by learning to ride and shoot and **tell the truth**.

The six Amesha Spentas (major attributes) of Ahura Mazda, embody the primal principles of the Zarathushti religion, and as such, can function as a guiding back-drop throughout our daily lives.

Let us look at these attributes in detail.

Vohu Manah : Good Mind, which has the capacity to reason and differentiate between right and wrong.

Asha Vahishta : Best Righteousness, or the ultimate underlying order of the universe.

Kshathra Vairya : Divine Kingdom, or the good society.

Spenta Armaity : Holy Devotion, or a quality which is present in an individual which inspires him or her to goodness.

Haurvetat : The spirit of well being which progressively becomes perfection.

Ameretat : Immortality.

Thus it is with the help of our Good Mind that we search for and find the Best Righteousness. This in turn creates the Desirable Kingdom or society in which our Holy Devotion for Ahura Mazda leads us to Perfection (or wholeness of being) and eventual Immortality of spirit.

The question that springs to our mind is **“how can we incorporate these divine attributes in our day-to-day lives ?”**

Well, each of these divine attributes has also got an earthly connection. Thus, Vohu Manah is in charge of animals, Asha Vahishta is associated with fire, Kshathra Vairya with metal, Spenta Armaiti represents the earth. Haurvetat is connected with water, and Ameretat with plants.

Not only do these Attributes have earthly connections but one can observe their manifestations in the daily life that we lived in India. For example the essence of maintaining Vohu Manah, is the rejection of all things negative. Therefore the habit of keeping our house free of all nasho such as dirt, loose hair, cut finger nails was aimed at filling our surroundings and consequently our minds with positives. Also, kindness to animals, and, in some orthodox households abstaining from eating flesh on Bahman roj and Bahman mahino was a way of paying respect to Vohu Manah.

Respect for fire and the ritual of doing the loban was perhaps a constant reminder for us to strive for the Best Righteousness. The act of giving false promises was considered sinful. This is not to imply that all Zarathushtis were always truthful, but, by and large trustworthiness was a desirable goal.

The ancient (and fast disappearing) Zarathushti beliefs about not polluting our earth could have been in direct homage to Spenta Armaity, borne out of our devotion to all creations of Ahura Mazda.

Our reverence for water, in the form of offering prayers at Avan Adar nu parabh, could have been aimed at attaining Haurvetat.

As mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, when I first started writing down the doctrinal aspects of Zarathushti living, I felt blocked. This blockage was created by a feeling of futility in trying to apply this doctrine in today’s fast-paced North American way of life. Then, when I revisited my early life in India, I realized how easily and seamlessly these doctrines were woven into our daily routines. Of course, this was made easier by the fact that most of us (especially those living in Parsi colonies), were surrounded by our own community and had easy access to places of worship and halls for social gatherings. When we immigrated to North America, we felt the lack of these facilities but were unable to do much about the problem as all of us were busy trying to find our footing in a foreign land.

So where does this leave us?

If we do not have access to Parsi colonies do we not have the ability to weave the core doctrines easily into our daily lives here?

As for going to an agiary, one can see the difficulties involved with distances in this continent. We drive for hours getting to and from work every day. If we then have to drive for another half hour to reach the nearest Darbe Meher every evening we are not going to be up to it. But there are many other routines that can be maintained at home, saying our prayers, developing a habit of being truthful even in our business dealings (a rare phenomenon in the business world).

In this way, although we Parsis are an exilic people, wherever we take our religion and its core principles and make them a part of our daily lives, we will keep our religion alive.

The Zarathushti religion is not rooted in buildings and neighbourhoods, otherwise it would have ended in Iran. It lives within us and survives. **The doctrine is not enshrined in books but in how we keep it in our hearts and in our lives.**