

Meditation the Zoroastrian way – a theological basis plus a *practicum*

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Theological Basis

In *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland* (Naples, 1980), G. Gnoli points out a similarity between Zoroastrian and Vedic religious systems that has been overlooked or rejected by scholars so far, namely Gatha's mystic and ecstatic aspects. "Now Zoroaster is not only a thinker — he is also a religious man who has a revelation and a visionary experience. The ecstatic and the thinker are united in him — It cannot be denied that the Gathic type of religious experience fits into the wider and richer Indo-Iranian framework of the inner vision and the mind's light." (p. 191) — (He who participates in the *maga* acquires a magic power, *Khshthra*, by means of which he can obtain an "illumination" (*Chisti*), a cognition outside the ordinary, a vision and a perception that are not mediated and not transmitted by the physical organs and senses.) (Gnoli sees a continuous religious conception based on inner sight from "*Khraateush Doithrabyo*" (eyes of the mind in the Zamyad Yasht, Yasht 19.94, with which *Astavat-ereta* will make the whole corporeal work imperishable to the idea that occurs in Pahlavi literature, of the *menog wenishnih* or of the *gyan cvasm (chashm)*. In this way the *maga* appears as a condition of human beings which is different from the normal one, a state which we could define as ecstatic or as an active trance where the person finds himself in a condition of "purity", *abezagih* in Pahlavi, which has not so much to do with a purely ethical concept as with an effective reality at a psychical and mental level. In fact, *abezagih* is a technical term in Pahlavi religious literature that translates *maga* as *abezagih (abezag wehih)* and it contrasts clearly with its opposite *gumezahih* or *ebgatih*, the state of "mixture", *menog* and *getig*, that is caused by the Assault of Ahriman, so that it can rightly be interpreted as a condition of "separation" of the two levels of existence, *menog*, Av. **mainyavaka* "of the spirit, incorporeal", and *getig*, *"gaethyaka* "corporeal". According to this interpretation, the man in the *menog* state is in communion with the Amesha Spentas, and it is precisely this which is, in my opinion, a part of the key that explains and gives meaning to the Gathic doctrine. The other part is what Gernod L. Windfuhr, following mostly in the footsteps of Lommel's works, is

trying to discover in the double system of opposites, good and evil and mind and matter, that characterizes the doctrine of the Amesha Spentas, their close interrelations and their reciprocal conditioning.” “What I should like to stress now is the possibility of interpreting the Zoroastrian message in a strictly soteriological sense, by emphasizing the central meaning that an experience of an ecstatic and mystic nature has in it: an experience that, through the concepts of *daena*-, which is typically Gathic, and of *Khvarenah*, which is not unknown in the Gathas, is probably related, in quite original ways, to the Indo-Iranian conceptions of inner light and mental vision” (pp. 194-6).

Gnoli further notes: “An extremely important essay for the study of “Aryan mysticism” is Kuiper’s “The Bliss of Asha.” Kuiper makes an excellent study of the idea of “the most blissful union with Asha”,¹ (Y. 49.8) and of the “bliss of Asha which manifests itself together with the lights.” (Y. 30.1), both in its specific meaning in Zoroastrian teaching and in its Aryan background, which is dominated, in his opinion, by the mythological equivalence of the nether world and the night sky (*Ibid.* 119). “I have used and discussed this essay extensively, especially in connection with the interpretation of Av. *Ashavan* that is largely devoted to some aspects of the Zoroastrian mystic or ecstatic experience, aspects that are ignored on account of a widespread prejudice about a supposed non-mystic nature of Zoroastrianism.” (p. 244)

“At any rate,” concludes Gnoli, “I am convinced that the study of the Iranian and Indian conceptions of *Asha* and *Rta*, as well as that of mental light and inner vision, greatly enlarges the field of research so as to take in the whole horizon of Aryan mysticism”, (p. 245), which could ultimately enable us to draw parallels between the Zoroastrian and Vedantic mysticism.

I may add that even in the younger Avesta we find such parallels, such as between Sanskrit *Tatvam Asi* (I am that) and Avestan *Man Ano Avayad Shudan* (I want to be that) which we pray at the very conclusion of all *Nyaeshes* and *Yashts*, a belief which, Dasturji K. S. Dabu so often impressed upon his audience in his speeches and writings.

Even when the concept of *Sraosha* was expressed in concrete terms in the Younger Avesta as in *Yasna* 57.9 (which describes the abode of *Sraosha* as in the thousand pillared house on the top of the mountain, shining from within by its own light), all such stately symbolism nevertheless still suggests *Sraosha* as a state of super-consciousness or bliss, much as an Indian *rishi* will attain a state of bliss - *Ananda*.

1 Kuiper, Franciscus B. J. "The Bliss of Asha." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 8 (1964): 96–129.

In the Younger Avesta, the word Sraosha is always followed by the word *Ashim*, spiritual reward or blessing, which could suggest the spiritual reward of eternal bliss associated with following Sraosha.

Sraosha as a link in Zoroastrian Mysticism

By rendering the meaning of Sraosha merely as 'hearkening' or 'obedience', the western scholars seem to have missed yet another meaning underlying this word, even though such a meaning becomes quite apparent in Yasna 43.12 when Zarathushtra so ardently longs for Sraosha: "Hearkening (Sraosha) will come to me, accompanied by Reward, having great blessings (or spiritual reward) who will distribute the rewards to both factions at the time of (our) salvation". Here, it seems that Sraosha does not represent obedience but what bliss one attains when one has always listened to and obeyed the precepts of Zarathushtra – perhaps something akin to the state of *Siddhi* attained by the Hindu mystics, though by different means. Those scholars that regard *Ashi* or *Ashish* as Reward to material wealth fail to recognize this interpretation of Sraosha and translate it as a proper name. Even in Hindu mysticism, the attainment of *Siddhi* is accompanied by *Ashi*, spiritual bliss – *Ashish* or *Anand*. Indeed, Yasna 45.5, declares that those who will give obedience to Mazda will attain completeness and immortality. Sraosha is often mentioned along with Asha, or Vohu Mana (good thinking) and thus Sraosha is a divine, blissful state of existence, which is the consequence of one obediently following the precepts of Zarathushtra.

However, G. Kreyenbroek echoes the views of most western scholars when he says: "It's (Sraosha's) identity with the proper name seems to show how closely concept and divinity were connected in the mind of the Prophet." (*Sraosha in the Zoroastrian Tradition*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1985, 9.) It is not contended at least here by me that Sraosha does or does not appear in the Gathas as a divinity, but it is clear in the verses such as Yasna 43.12, a Zoroastrian clearly longs for the blissful state that one is rewarded with when one listens to his God, to his prophet and to his *Daena*. It seems that Sraosha is both obedience to God, as well as the state of blissfulness one attains by listening to God, just as *Ratum* in the Gathas is both a personal "Judge" as well as a "Judgment" or its accomplishment. When Zoroastrian longs for Sraosha to come to him, it is not Sraosha the Yazata, but the blessedness that comes from being in complete compliance with God's commandments and Manthras, an exalted state of mind which enables one to be in touch with the other world, and sort of catch a glimpse of the other world. This may further explain why Sraosha came to be so closely and prominently associated

with intuition, as well as with the ceremonies for the protection and guidance in the other world of recently deceased souls.

Kreyenbroek concedes that at least “In the Prophet’s case”, Sraosha may represent an exalted state of mind that Harkening to Sraosha “directly enables him to hear the words of Lord Wisdom”, (*Ibid*, 13), or “a situation which is outside the normal human sphere, in which the Prophet will be directly in touch with the “eternal” as in Yasna 28.5, or “the obediently attentive frame of mind which enables the Prophet to hear the word of the Lord. Harkening is presumably particularly needed at a time when normal human conditions no longer prevail, and man is brought directly into contact with the divine. It seems possible that it is especially under such conditions that the Prophet hopes to ‘hear’ the words of Lord Wisdom, (*Ibid*, 17), as in Yasna 33.6, when he says “through it, O Lord Mazda, I long to have your vision (*Darshotoish* - Sanskrit – *Darshan*) and consultation with Thee” (*Ibid*, 17). Thus, Sraosha seems to represent a bridge between the material and the spiritual world, or as Kreyenbroek puts it “a time when the human and divine spheres meet” (*Ibid*, 17). The state of attaining Sraosha thus opens up the gates of the spiritual world to one who has hearkened to the commands of God and provides him or her a glimpse of God. This state is so supremely satisfying that “Zarathushtra does give even the breath of his own person as a gift” for it (Yasna 33.14) Nothing else can possibly explain why Zarathushtra would want to offer his own life-breath as a gift, as this blessed state of Sraosha is the *summum bonum* of human spiritual quest.

However, this blessed state of Sraosha is attainable not by Zarathushtra alone, but by “whomsoever Thou dost wish him to be, Wise One.” (Yasna 44.16) Since Zarathushtra exhorts his followers to be God-like in every way (Yasna 34.1, etc.), he could not exclude the *Ashavans* from realizing the spiritual experience of attaining the state of Sraosha, though Kreyenbroek does not infer this from the context of Yasna 44.16 (*Ibid*, 24). However, he comes close to the above interpretation of Sraosha when he opines “It seems that it (Sraosha) denotes not only inspiration but also and perhaps primarily, the mentality which enables the Prophet to receive this inspiration, viz., a readiness to hearken and obey. The same mentality apparently prompts his followers to listen to him. Harkening to God thus links God, Prophet and believers. Harkening is involved when the Prophet leaves the profanity of everyday life and finds himself in direct contact with the divine, probably during an act of worship (Yasna 33.5). This appears to be consistent with the assumption that Sraosha was associated with inspiration and thus in a sense had the function of a mediator between the human and divine spheres. The coming of

Sraosha is represented as an event which is expected to take place when the righteous have defeated the forces of evil (Yasna 28.5; 33.5; 43.12; 44.16), or say, when we have removed all evil in our own selves and in the world. This may perhaps be understood to mean that perfect 'hearkening' will be possible only when "the resistance has been broken" (Yasna 44.16), and men will be wholly receptive to God's commands" (*Ibid.*, 29-30), While Kreyenbroek perhaps comes closer in understanding the spiritual role Sraosha plays in the Gathic mysticism than most western scholars understandably since he has studied Sraosha most exhaustively, he tends to perceive Sraosha as "The mentality which enables the Prophet to receive that inspiration" but not also as actually receiving the inspiration itself with its attendant spiritual reward of eternal bliss as embodied by Ashi. Otherwise, how can one explain "the coming of Sraosha" when the righteous have defeated the forces of evil" as it is also the time for the coming of the Saoshyants and the Kingdom of God (*Vohu Khshathra*). Thus, "the coming of Sraosha" here represents the coming of that spiritual enlightenment for all faithful followers at the end of the world.

Ushtana and Prana

It seems etymologically *Ushtana* becomes *Prana* meaning breath in Sanskrit and it enjoys esoteric significance in both. *Ushtana* is referred to thrice in the Gathas – Yasna 30.7, 33.14, and 43.16. In Yasna 33.14, which is also included at the very beginning of Atash Nyaesh, Zarathushtra dedicates *Ushtana* (Breath) "of even his own person as a gift in order that there be for the Wise Lord Predominance of good thinking along with the predominance of the action and the word allied with truth." (Inslar). How can all that be realized through breath. Here is a very humble attempt at explaining it from eight decades of figuring it out as best as I can.

It is well known that the Vedic people made the breath a religious concern and process. As observed by Kenneth G. Zysk, "In the minds of the early Indians, respiration was the principal indicator of life and what humans breathed was the motivating force of both the cosmos and human existence. This cosmic wind was mankind's vital breath (*Prana*), the principal manifestation of a person's immortal soul.

After receiving the existing literature on the significance of *Prana*, Zysk maintains that a "central theory uniting respiration and the bodily winds appeared in the Vedic literature, which later developed into Ayurvedic medicine and science of Yoga". Yoga assimilated the physiological theories about the bodily winds, resulting in "a harmonious blending of medicine and Yoga". "In the minds of the

Vedic Indians,” states Zysk, breath was equated with, contained in, and associated with all elements which produced and maintained life. In short, breath was life's universal witness”. (“The Science of Respiration and the Doctrine of the Bodily Winds in Ancient India,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113.2, 1993, 198-213).

The cosmic wind that blows in the universe gave the usual course of things or the cosmic order (*rta*) (Asha in the Gathas) in the same way that breath in living beings motivates life. Thus, wind (*vayu* in Sanskrit, as well as in Avesta) is the breath (*prana*) of the cosmic person (*Purusha*) (RV 10.90.13) and the dead person's spirit (*atman*) goes to the wind (*vata* in Sanskrit, as well as in Avesta) per *Rig Veda* 10.16.3. In humans, speech results from mankind's wind. The Zoroastrian priests cover their mouth while praying in order to keep their breath away from the fire in Zoroastrian rituals and its origin may be well rooted in this ancient belief that speech results from mankind's wind or is associated with it. The association between *prana*, life's indicator and motivator, and atmospheric wind (*vata*) led to the establishment of the health-giving and healing virtues of wind. Wind bestows strength to life and contains the elixir of immortality (*Rig Veda* 10.186). The medicinal significance of wind occurs also in the Avesta (Jean Filliozat, *La Doctrine classique de la medecine indienne*, 1962, English, 1971).

The *Atharvaveda* refers to vital breath and respiration, continuing the theory of breath begun in the *Rig Veda* and expanding on the importance of respiration indicated in the late Rigvedic passage. *Prana* in the *Atharvaveda* is associated with life and the promotion of longevity.

The importance of *prana* as life's promoter and sustainer is indicated by *Atharva Veda* (11.4(6)), an entire hymn devoted to life-breath.

The association between human breath and atmospheric wind (*vata*, *vayu*), indicated in the famous “Purusha” hymn of the *Rig Veda* (10.90.13), is developed in the *Atharva Veda*. Wind is breath's principal link to the cosmos, for breath comes from air or wind. The cosmic fire is also regarded as the source of breath and because of its self-motivating and life-producing characteristics, it is equated with breath in the *Atharva Veda* as pointed out by Zisk. (*Ibid*, 200). It should be also noted that Agni, the god of fire is addressed six times as an Asura in the older *Rig Veda*, next to Varuna and Mitra-Varuna addressed four times. Agni is the only god visible at all sacrifices and hence represents the presence of the invisible ones, as clearly stated in the *Rig Veda* (II.1, etc). “Moreover the number of Agni hymns in the older *Rig Veda* (98) is five times as frequent as those to Varuna (5)

and Mitra-Varuna (15). “It is also interesting to note that the second designation of Rudra as an Asura in *Rig Veda* II.1, is a hymn identifying Agni with all the gods of the religion.” (S. Insler, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.4, 1993, p. 596). Thus, Agni (fire) also has an important role in the Vedic tradition.

A Practicum

Having written and spoken about almost every phase and aspect of Zoroastrianism, I thought it essential to deal with the place of meditation as an extension of prayer and spirituality as so little is said or written about it. After trying to find what suitable object to meditate on, as I was quite familiar with Gathas, I found it in what Asho Zarathushtra himself hints at in Yasna 43.9:

“Yes, I have already realized Thee to be virtuous, Wise Lord, when he attending me with Vohu Mana, Good Mind. To His question, “Whom dost thou wish to serve” and I then replied: “Thy fire (*Thwahmai Athrem*).” Stanly Insler here notes, “Fire was considered to be manifestation of Asha (truth). Therefore worship of the fire was worship of Asha (truth).”

I wish every fire-temple, especially in North America, would display this quotation very prominently to emphasize what we really worship in a fire-temple: the fire (cosmic energy) of Ahura Mazda that pervades and governs the universe through His Asha.

The whole universe, the whole cosmos is governed and maintained by God's fire, cosmic energy that pervades the universe. Unfortunately, our Iranian brethren are unjustly and constantly derided as fire-worshippers to this very day, but the Vedic Aryans with whom we share our history and traditions have a similar concept about fire as cosmic energy, as already noted. But first let us see what our own texts say on this subject.

What Yasna 57.9 (or Hoshbam, The Dawn Prayer) says comes close to the Vedantic notion of *Tatvam Asi*, or *Soham*, 'I may become That', or 'I may merge with that (Divinity)': With the loftiest Asha (cosmic principle that also represents cosmic energy or fire), with the best Asha may we be able to attain your vision (*Daresaama*, meaning *Darshana* in Sanskrit), may we encircle You (and) become one with You forever.” The phrase Man Aano Aavaayad Shudan means the same: “I want to be That.” These two phrases were very often quoted by Dasturji Dabu to us students at Cama Athorman Institute in order to make the same point I am making here. He impressed us students so much with his saintly personality that I once asked him if he had had any mysterious experiences and he said the only one he had

experienced was seeing light all around him just before he was going to speak on Atash Nyaesh, something so very akin to what Yasna 30 mentions about luminescence (*Raochebish*, Modern Persian *Roshi*).

Even later Pahlavi texts do not fail to mention the cosmic dimension of fire. As stated in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3(a), (Cambridge University Press, New York, New York, 1983, pages 899-900): “In Mazdean orthodoxy, when Ohrmazd creates the material world he produces at first from Infinite Light a form of fire, out of which all things are to be born. This form of fire is “brought white round and visible from afar.” (The reference it provides for this is: J. Duschene-Guilleman, “The form of fire,” in *Dr. J.M. Unvala Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1964, pp. 14ff.). It adds: “according to the Pahlavi Rivayat, Infinite Light produces a giant body, whose parts become the parts of the world. Now, another of these texts gives us the name of this giant body or form of fire,” the text being *Datastan-I Dinik* (Question 63).

From what we observed so far, we can see the importance of dedicating our breath, even as Zarathushtra did, to attain the state of Sraosha, that is of listening to the divine message Zarathushtra imparted to us by concentrating on the cosmic energy, which is God's own fire (Yasna 43.9) and on our breath which indeed is a part of it. So, first try to relax – stretch every part of your body and then let go and assume a very relaxed position and forget all your troubles and problems, and then concentrate on your breath and on *Raochebish* – divine light surrounding you on all the sides in the manner most amenable to you. Prepare yourself to bring about Sraosha-like state by breathing in and out as slowly as you can. Breathing makes a sound, even if you slow down breathing, it makes some sound, just as when you breathe heavily and its sound matches so well with the sound of Ashem Vohu (Truth is good): mentally say *Ashem* as you gently breath in and *Vohu* as you calmly breathe out. Try to match this sound with each breath so both merge into one another and become one and the same. Try to associate the sound with the most beautiful vision you can imagine of cosmic rays surrounding you. Just close your eyes and close your mind to everything else and concentrate on breathing this way. Just switch off your mind like we switch off the light. However breathing is like thinking and just as you cannot concentrate on mind and mental processes all the time, you will find that you may not be able to follow the breath this way all the time. But do not worry – just bring your breathing back on the track as soon as you realize your mind has wandered off. So you cannot go wrong in this method just try again and again. Let the divine light penetrate every limb in your body and try to feel one with it. You will see when you breathe in, the breath temperature is like that of the air outside

but it is a little warmer when you breathe out as it comes out of your body, as your body has inner fire that keeps it going – if you do not breathe, you cannot live. The body has a very integrated network of millions and millions of blood vessels, nerves, etc. and is more integrated and complex than the most complex factory or industrial complex in the world. It is amazing how the inner fire keeps it going.

Even Asho Zarathushtra wants to dedicate his *Ushtana*, which philologically somehow is the same word as *Prana* in Sanskrit both meaning breath and seems to share the same etymology as *Ushtana*, meaning warmth or heat. So try to associate breath, *Ushtana* with warmth, fire, Asha. Just continue to associate *Ashem* with breathing in and *Vohu* with breathing out, but when you have done it long enough, try to prolong each syllable and pause in between each syllable like *Ashē---m*, *Vo---hu*. Now that you have begun to associate breath with warmth of fire, imagine spreading the warmth from head to toe starting with the head. As you breathe in saying *Ashem*, imagine sending heat coming from the inner fire within you to all over your head and brain and skull and let it spread the cosmic energy all over there, thereby wiping out all the stress from there and preparing it for a Sraosha-like inner stage which will be preparing you for hearkening, that is, listening to the divine teachings of Asho Zarathushtra even as he declares doing it himself and dedicating his breath for it. As you say *Vohu*, feel the warmth in the breath as it goes out. Now do the same thing with face and every other part of the body – with neck, shoulders, arms, hands and palms. Make a very special effort to imagine that your palms are getting warmer and warmer at every minute and as you do it faithfully it will lift stress from your head which is proven so often and my own patients surprise me time and again by telling me doing it lifted off their worst migraine even though they did not tell me they had one and I was not even aware of it.

Then repeat this process with the rest of the body from neck down to your toes.

Do it at your own pace and do not hurry and then gently end the process at your own will. Feel blissful Asha all inside of you and lock it up and keep it within you as long as you can. If you measure your blood pressure and heart rate before and after this meditation, you will surely find a great difference, of course for the better. I for one never had a problem with my blood pressure thanks to practicing this method for decades. It brings about a harmonious union of body, mind and spirit as much as is possible for a human being in this modern world. But you have to practice it regularly for it to be of lasting effect. Good luck and God bless!