

# THE GATHIC TRADITIONS OF ZARATHUSHTRA

by **Pervez Mistry** (Canada)

[The following is the text of a speech presented by another youth at the Zarathushtra Congress on 30-12-2000. You will see that the intelligent youth of the community are now on their way to realise that Religion is a matter of mystical science.]

To many Zarathushtis, the holy Gathas are the basis for our religion- the beginning and the end. But this is a misleading notion in two ways- firstly, there is so much more to our religion than just the Gathas, and secondly, we are interpreting most of our texts, including the Gathas, in a literal sense performing rituals, saying prayers, and giving veneration to Fire.

Many of us talk about the Gathas, but don't really know what they are- so it'll help if I start off with a very brief explanation. I myself used to listen at lectures and congresses about the Gathas and I naturally assumed it was a book on it's own, but it's not- let me explain. Ahura Mazda revealed to Zarathushtra the workings of the universe- he learned about what lies beyond our physical senses and about everything we could not possibly learn on our own. With this knowledge, Zarathushtra composed the Avesta in what is called "Frashusho manthra", which, for all intents and purposes, cannot be considered to be a language as we would define it- think of it as a Godly language of pure sounds. The word "Avesta" itself means "the unknowable". Zarathushtra's highest disciples, the Zarathushtratemos (also known as the Magi), then converted the Avesta from Frashusho manthra into Manthra Spenta- into a physical language that mankind could use, but still retaining it's vibratory and esoteric powers. Based upon the 3 lines and 21 words of the Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayer, the Avesta is made up of 21 Nasks, or volumes, and is divided into 3 categories: Gathic, Datic and Hada manthric. The Gathic deals mainly with spiritual knowledge, the Datic deals with our worldly existence, knowledge, etc. and the Hada manthric deals with the combination of matter and spirit between the material and spiritual worlds.

Over time, most of the 21 Nasks of the Avesta have been lost or destroyed. A lot of us know the stories of how there were two complete sets of ten scriptures- one which was destroyed when Alexander burned everything in sight, and the other was probably carried off to the library at Alexandria, which archeologists now believe probably sank into the Mediterranean after an earthquake. So even though we have lost much of the actual writings, the Pahlavi Dinkard contains a summary and description of the texts. The Gathas, as we know them, are a part of the Gathic division, and are found in the 21st Nask, know as "Satud Yasht" or Staot Yasna. Within this 21st Nask, there are divisions known as Visperad, Yasna and Haptan Yasht. The Yasna has further subdivisions known as "ha", but essentially, the Gathas are the middle chapters from it. They are considered distinct from the rest of the Avesta because they are written in meter; meaning: written in poetry form.

Now this is where a lot of discussion comes in- scholars say that because of their language and writing style, the Gathas are the only true teachings of Zarathushtra and that the rest of the Avesta is "post-Zoroastrian" and written by later priests. And that really is one of the main problems with our understanding of Zoroastrianism. Out of the 21 Nasks, there is only one that is complete, and it's not even the one containing the Gathas - it is the 19th Nask, the Javit-Shidabad, more commonly know as the Vendidad. So think of it: the 21st and last Nask, which contains the Gathas, isn't even complete. Would you be able to write a review for a book that has about 20 out of 21 pages ripped out of it? Besides the vendidad, no other Nask has survived in it's entirety. Over thousands of years, we have lost large amounts of Zarathushtra's teachings, consequently, how can it make sense to grasp one small part and think of that as being the only original and authentic teachings of Zarathushtra? The Gathas make up less than 5% of the Avesta and have no mention of many significant aspects of our religion. And the funny thing is, there are other parts of the Avesta also written in the Gathic dialect, but they are not considered part of the Gathas. Poetry and prose are found interspersed throughout the Avesta.

One thing to remember is that the Avesta is much more than what we see and understand. Think of it as an intricate maze -there is a way to get through it, but there are many corners to turn and there are keys that need to be found to unlock certain parts. It almost seems like it is written geometrically and sometimes you have to move backwards to be able to move forward again.

The Vendidad is a part of the Datic group of Nasks and is written in prose - however, it is probably the most run-down, the most insulted of all our scriptures because it is misunderstood. It talks a lot about "purity" and overcoming evil. There is confusion because it is written metaphorically - for example, there is a chapter of the Vendidad that deals with contracts & punishments and it mentions that the punishment for breaking certain types of contracts are so-many hundred lashes of a whip. Another chapter says that if you bury a dog or a man, the punishment is 500 lashes from a horse-whip and another 500 from a regular whip. There is even mention of different types of punishment for the murder of different types of dogs, which actually comes out to being more than the punishment for murdering a man. So if you read this kind of stuff, you would think that Zarathushtis are fanatics for whipping! No, our prophet wrote the Vendidad - allegorically- when a dog is mentioned, it means one thing, the lash of a whip means something else. And when you can decipher the true meaning, you realize that it is closely related to the Gathas and the rest of the Avesta. The Gathas will tell you about how spiritual perfection cannot be attained without achieving a state of purity, but it is the Vendidad that will tell you how to reach that state of purity. The Vendidad is not just a book, but it is also an important prayer ceremony done at night to minimize the effects of darkness or evil.

There are parts of the Gathas that are repeated in other parts of the Yasna, and inversely, there are parts of the Yasna that are incorporated into the Gathas. The Yasna, by the way, is basically the remainder of the 21st Nask that is not written in poetry. Many of these yasna or yashts are what we use for our daily prayers. Now this brings me to the topic of prayers and rituals. Are rituals a Gathic tradition? Yes. The lines we recite in our prayers come from the Avesta, including the Gathas. There are several Nasks of the Avesta that clearly show that rituals were taught by Zarathushtra himself. Wearing of Sudreh-Kusti is also mentioned in the Avesta. These things may not necessarily be mentioned in the Gathas, but once again, the Gathas are *only a part* of the larger Avesta.

Sadly, there are those inside and outside our religion who will fabricate reasons as to why we don't need rituals, why we don't need to say our prayers, why we don't need sudreh-kusti, etc. Their reasons? Because they're supposedly an inconvenience. Because some people can't sit patiently for an hour while the mobed prays in a language they don't understand. Because sudreh-kusti is just a "symbolic shirt" that reminds us that we're Zarathushtis. You know, you and I can't even begin to imagine the unseen effects that are created when we properly perform our ceremonies and rituals.

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# THE GATHA ARE NOT THE ONLY COMPONENT OF ZARTHOSHTI DIN.

## Kriyakaam Do Have a Rationale from the Unseen and Unknown Regions of Nature.

Parvez Jimi Mistry

[In the last issue we published the first part of the speech delivered by a youth of Canada, Parvez Mistry, at the Houston Congress. Here is the continuation. Parvez speaks about the Kriyakaam - Rituals and Ceremonies, and points out that they have a mystical science behind them. There are unseen and unknown regions of Nature which are beyond our 3-dimensional consciousness. Kriyakaam is related to such spiritual regimes.

It is a pleasant surprise to see the youths of our Community presenting a glimpse of mystical Sciences. The Gatha-alone-cult is now a century old obsolete fossil. Only the escapists relish the cult.

Well done Parvez - Editor.]

One of the foundations of Zoroastrianism is the concept that the vibrations we create affect our surroundings; academics and scholars ridicule the idea that our prayers have any sort of "magical" or unseen effects. But science is now showing that the concept of vibrations is *fundamental* to the very existence of universe. Every particle, every atom, every sub-atomic particle has its own vibration. Even our internal organs have their own characteristic resonance - you can actually heal or destroy them using certain sound frequencies. Kidney stones can be destroyed using ultrasonic sound directed at them. Then why is it so ridiculous to say that our prayers are manthric and that they do indeed affect our surroundings? When we translate our prayers into other languages or make songs out of them, we lose the gift, the hidden effect that our prayers have. Consider that: what if it's not just the sound we produce from praying - **there may be so many other unseen effects - maybe the electrical impulses in our brain emanate in a particular pattern while praying, even the transfer of neurons in our nervous system could be causing small changes in our own magnetic field.** It's been proven that an electrical charge is capable of distorting the fabric of space-time. Distorting space-time implies that by using thought, we could be minutely altering our own physical existence in this 3-dimensional universe. In current theoretical physics, there's a lot of speculation about the possible existence of what are known as wormholes. These wormholes are like shortcut tunnels connecting different points in space and time - *could this be* a way that our soul, our "ruwan", connects with our own eternal fravashi on a different plane of existence where time has no meaning? Good thoughts, good words and good deeds is a beautiful and simple motto to live by, but by extrapolating it using science, it could very well summarize the *existence of the entire cosmos*. Imagine then, that these are the results that *Zarathushtra knew about* when he taught and prescribed all the various rituals, prayers, laws to our ancestors? What I've mentioned are only *possible* effects of what science can already detect - there must be so much more to our rituals that we can't yet even theorize about.

**In the Nirang-din ceremony**, the urine of the white bull (called taro or gomez) is used. When the ceremony starts, the gomez is untreated and contains what you would normally find in urine - but when the ceremony is finished after the ceremony **the gomez is completely pure** and even has certain healing properties. In the 1960's, after a nirang-din ceremony was performed in India, a sample of the consecrated nirang was taken to a lab in London for a chemical analysis. The scientists were amazed at what they found. They did tests for bacterial growth using two samples of nirang brought from India (one was 6 yrs. old and the other 6 months old), as well as a control sample from a regular bull on a farm in England. As expected, the control sample was contaminated with impurities and bacteria, and **what the bacteriologists found in the Nirang shocked them. Anticipating colonies of bacteria in the 6 month-old sample, they found that it was completely pure. And more amazingly, the 6-year old sample was just as sterile! Indeed, this can be attributed to nothing else but the strength of our prayers.**

I recently read about an interesting phenomenon called "sonoluminescence". This sonoluminescence is a glow that happens when high-pitched sound waves are directed into water. A cloud of tiny, glowing bubbles appear and these bubbles can reach temperatures of up to 10,000 degrees F. Some scientists are hoping to prove that this reaction could be used to produce nuclear fusion. My point is that there could be so many other visible and invisible effects that vibrations have on our surroundings.

Most of us have been to an Agiary or Atash Behram - have you ever noticed the "grooves" built into the floor around where they perform ceremonies? When higher ceremonies are performed, those grooves are actually channels that are filled with water - their function is to create a sort of insulating barrier to prevent unwanted outside influences or energies from "tainting" the ceremony. And if you were to divert energy, such as electricity, around an object, **what better freely-flowing conductor to use than water?** These channels are a small part of the mechanics for performing a jashan that have been followed for thousands of years. Our ancestors were wise enough to realize that **just because the effects are unseen doesn't mean they're imaginary.**

I'll give you a personal example of what I mean. I'm presently working at the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station just outside Toronto. Although it's run very safely, there are occasional problems where there is a risk of slight radiation exposure, even from dust that has been carried on someone's clothes. So when I actually go into the plant, it would be pretty ignorant of me to question or disregard the "radiation hazard" signs inside the reactor bldg. **Just because I can't see the gamma radiation doesn't mean it's not there - I take it on trust that** where there are signs "radiation warning", that there must *really* be something there. Same with religion - who am I to question what is and what isn't valid? In the plant, we have geiger counters and whole body scanners that can measure radioactive contamination - what do we have to measure *spirituality*?

How can we truly measure the spiritual effect of performing a jashan or navjote or any of our ceremonies? Until the time comes when we have spiritually advanced far enough, **we have to take it on faith.** Our religion has been handed down to us by people much wiser than ourselves. If they threw away what a small minority thought of as redundant or symbolic or non-Gathic, then I wouldn't be here in front of you today. I would not feel the kind of *intense pride* that I have for my religion. Zoroastrianism would have become simply a verbal religion - an *academic religion* based on discussion - without meaning, without ceremonies.

That's what is happening today - **we are being taught by academics, and we are so gullible that we flock to them for being some kind of "light in the darkness" and we put them on a pedestal with honours.** It is their job, their profession, to develop new theories and then prove them, even if it means re-interpreting our religion to suit their hypothesis. It doesn't matter how absurd the theory, we Zarathushtis will take *anything* given to us! **Some have the gall to tell us that Zarathushtra was a fictitious person and that he never even existed, others say that Zarathushtra and his priests were high on hallucinogenic plants when they wrote the Avesta.** You know, just by repeating or even thinking about what some of these guys have said, I feel like I'm doing a sin. What do they care about the *religion* itself? For them, it's just an academic subject to be analyzed and dissected.

Many Zarathushtis and outside scholars think that our religion has been tainted over the centuries by priests who have added their own commentary into our ceremonies and prayers. The people being referred to have indeed, when necessary, recomposed our scriptures, but for a higher purpose than we could ever understand. These Saoshyants had proven their piety and earned the trust of fellow Zarathushtis. One of the most famous, whom I'm sure many people have heard of, was **Dastur Adarbad Marespand** - near the beginning of the Sassanian era, he recomposed our prayers from what had been lost. Another was Arda Viraf, who it seems, was actually taken beyond our physical universe, and observed what exists beyond our concept of life - he wrote what is called the "Arda-Viraf Nameh". There are many other stories of people who have lived extraordinary lives. When the fire from an Atash Behram is consecrated, 16 different types of fires are combined and purified over and over again. **When Iranshah was being consecrated, the fire that was needed from lightning was brought down, on queue, by the prayers of Dastur Nariosang Daval and his team of highly evolved mobeds.** These might seem like fairy tales to many of you, but to me, this is my

history as real as it gets - stories like this give me pride and reinforce my faith.

European civilization, from the end of Rome until the Enlightenment, was considered to be in the "Dark Ages" because much of Europe's advances in art, literature and science were lost or forgotten during that time. What if mankind, in general, has been in some sort of "dark age" for the past few thousands of years and only now are catching up? By saying that, you probably think that "this guy watches too much science fiction", but I honestly believe that our religion, with-all it's ceremonies, prayers, hidden meanings and ancient texts, will indeed once again - someday - *reveal all of man's answers to life*.

It has already begun. At a time when we should be marveling at what we have and asking ourselves, "how could our ancestors have known that... ", we Zarathushtis, with all our conveniences are shortcuts, are discarding what we don't understand. More and more of us today think of Zoroastrianism as an increasingly tangible, one that has become easy and convenient to learn, but it is far from it. It's like me going to a few websites and then saying that I have explored the entire internet and that I know all the mechanisms and subtleties that make it function. Someday, perhaps even thousands of years from now, science will catch up to our religion and prove what we today, in all our arrogance, take for granted.

Unfortunately, we have all but lost the tradition of parents passing on the religion to their children because the parents themselves don't know where to start. In my house, my mother would teach religion every day, whether we liked it or not. Most people don't know the technicalities, including myself, but at least you can instill a sense of *reverence* into your kids. Make them appreciate the few rituals we have left. Instead of thinking of our Towers of Silence as being something primitive and barbaric, teach them that there is so much beauty and common sense to our disposal of the dead. Teach them things like the portrait of Zarthosht-sahib is something that should be respected and kept in all Zarathushti homes, that the sudreh-kusti is *not* just a rope and shirt that people "used to" wear. We can't continue to exist as a religion of people figuring things out on our own. If you don't know something, seek out the answer - there is a good explanation to any and all our religious traditions, whether it's Gathic or non-Gathic.

All these congresses or other such Zarathushti events, we should try emphasizing on our people's history as a start for building pride in ourselves. **Our religion will not survive on discussion alone.** Rather than arguing whether or not the Vendidad is Zarathushti or when did Zarathushtra exist, we should focus on the bravery of our ancestors, miracles that have taken place in our religion, **we should try correlating advancements in science with what is already said in our religion.** There's an inspiring line I remember from a song my mother often sang to me when I was a kid - it was in Gujarati and it goes: "*koj puche maneh ka chhe tahra ZarthoshtPaigambar, dil cheeri ne hun bataavo, mara jiggar-ni andar* - meaning: **"if someone asks me where is my Zarthosht-Paigambar, I'll tear myself open and show him within my heart."** My wife and I had a son earlier this year and it is now my *duty* to teach my kids to remember lines like that. We're going to make sure that they will be proud to call themselves Zarathushti.

In conclusion, I hope I have driven home the point that Zoroastrianism is not to be trivialized - it's not just the Gathas and it is not something to come out of a classroom or textbook - it's essence comes from *practising* with faith. Future historians might look back and say "careless, ignorant Zoroastrians - they threw away treasures that were given to them on a golden platter!" Don't let that happen! **You can start by doing your kusti every day and having a simple devo in your home.** Don't ask why - don't think of it as a waste of 5 minutes per day - just do it! Then may be your kids will do it. And hopefully their kids will do it too. And that is how our religion has, and *will*, survive *forever*.

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