

Manthras, An Introduction.

The word 'manthra' (*mąθra-* *mąθrā-*) appears frequently in the Gathas.¹ In Avestan, the 'n' that appears in the English word is not specifically sounded, the first *ą* being pronounced with a nasal sound (like the French word 'mon' where the 'o' is pronounced with a nasal sound and the 'n' is not specifically sounded), or the Hindi words *kam*, 'work', or *aam* 'mango' in each of which the 'a' is pronounced with a nasal sound. But when 'manthra' is used as an untranslated word in English, I realize that the 'n' is sounded. So let's not worry about its pronunciation, but think rather about its meaning.

What is a 'manthra'. More specifically, what does Zarathushtra intend when he uses the word 'manthra'?

Some meditation techniques today use the word 'manthra' to mean a word or phrase that is meaningless to the reciter, which he recites as he meditates, so that the 'mind' is occupied (with the meaningless recitation), and is less likely to intrude all sorts of thoughts and ideas, while the person meditating is trying to keep his mind blank. This is not the meaning of 'manthra' in the Gathas.

And yet . . . and yet . . . reciting the Khordeh Avesta prayers that we were taught by rote as children, without knowing what they meant, can indeed create a peaceful state of mind which enables silent meditation, although that was not the intent of the ancient Zoroastrians who composed those Khordeh Avesta prayers. (Life is full of ironies).

Outgrowing the judgmental certainties of my youth, I have now come around to a sincere belief, that if a person derives peace of mind from praying in a language s/he does not understand, that fact does not make the prayer worthless. In such instances, I now think the heart/mind reciting such prayers is in fact communicating directly, wordlessly, with the Divine. And that indeed is both prayer and meditation.

Taraporewala tells us that in much later YAv. texts, as in later Sanskrit texts, 'manthra' came to mean a spell.² A spell is not the meaning of 'manthra' in the Gathas.

The word 'manthra' derives from *man-* 'to think'.³ So originally, a manthra was words that make us think. Mills sometimes translates 'manthra' as 'words of reason',⁴ which is consistent with its derivation from *man-* 'to think'.

In early Sanskrit, a manthra meant a sacred formula.⁵ And Insler comments that *mąθra-* is almost always used in the Gathas, in the sense of the word of the deity,⁶ ~ a sacred formulation, precept, promise (the promised Word), command, instruction, teaching.⁷

If we put together the fact that manthra derives from *man-* 'to think', and is used in the Gathas for the Word or teaching of Wisdom (*mazdā-*), we see that in Zarathushtra's perception, the teachings of religion must be words of reason ~ teachings that require us to think (not forgetting that a part of good thinking is also the meditation through which we access what the later texts call the 'wisdom within' or 'innate wisdom').⁸

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra often calls himself a 'manthran' (*mąθrān-*) ~ a word that is routinely translated as 'prophet'. But it actually means, one who composes, sings, or recites Divine teachings that are words of reason, words that make us think,⁹ ~ which is precisely what he intended his song-poems, the Gathas, to be. His perception of Wisdom's teachings, as 'words of reason' ~ words that

require us to think ~ is entirely consistent with the search for truth that is a fundament of his thought,¹⁰ and with the culmination of this search which is the House of Good Thinking, the House of Song (Zarathushtra's 'paradise'), a state of joyful enlightenment ~ which is another way of saying Wisdom personified *mazdā-*.

The YAv. Yasnas sometimes call Zarathushtra's teachings "manthra spenta". And if *spanta-* means 'beneficial' (which is the essence of the sacred),¹¹ we see that his followers' perception of his teachings in the first few centuries after his advent, was that they are 'words of reason' which are 'beneficial-sacred'. Beneficial, certainly. But why 'sacred'? How can a teaching be 'sacred'? Well, calling his teachings 'sacred' is not an exercise in grovelling. Zarathushtra's path is the path of the amesha spenta ~ the path of the true (correct) order of existence (a beneficial order), its comprehension good thinking, its beneficial embodiment in thought, word and action, its good rule, its complete attainment, the wholly beneficial way of being, resulting in a state of being that is no longer bound by mortality. These are the qualities (amesha spenta) that make a being Divine. So his path is, literally, the path of the Divine (sacred) ~ the living Word.

Thus, we begin to understand why the later YAv. texts speak of *tanu.mqθra-* ~ the embodied Word, or the incarnate Word.¹² And we begin to understand why certain YAv. texts speak of the *mqθra-spanta-* as being the 'soul' of the Divine.¹³

In the following chapters, I would like to discuss the three most important prayers¹⁴ in Zoroastrianism. They are not 'prayers' at all, in that they are not addressed to 'God', nor are they in praise of 'God'. They are manthras, nuggets of wisdom, which encapsulate core ideas of Zarathushtra, so that the reciter can meditate on them in all their multi-dimensioned beauty, and see how they apply to his life.

The first two (commonly called the 'Ashem Vohu' and the 'Yatha Ahu Vairyo') are believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself. They are short verses of 3 lines each. They are the first 'prayers' taught to Zoroastrian children ~ before they are six years old ~ and they have been universally recited for millennia by Zoroastrians of all ages.

I think Zarathushtra composed these 2 manthra as stand alone pieces for everyone ~ warriors, herdsmen, artisans, priests, scholars and non-scholars, adults and children, everyone. And they have something to say at more than one level. At a basic level, they function as primers that encapsulate his core teachings, so they are meaningful for those who want straightforward answers. And they have also been crafted in multi-dimensioned ways that engage our minds and hearts and provide insights into many of Zarathushtra's beautiful and unusual ideas.

The third manthra was composed many centuries after Zarathushtra, but reflects one of his core ideas in intriguing ways.

Certain later texts advise us to meditate on the Gathas by thinking about them, turning them over in our minds, letting our minds play over a given verse or passage. The ideas that follow are the fruits of my own such meditations on these three manthras (based on my understanding of Zarathushtra's teachings and certain later texts). But in meditating on these manthras, you should feel free to use your own good thinking and come to your own conclusions.

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¹ In (transliterated) Gathic script the word manthra (in stem form) would be *mąθra-* /*mąθrā-*. Skjaervo 2006 shows *mąθra-* as a masc. noun, and *mąθrā-* as a fem. noun. Insler 1975 comments that the stem is masc. *mąθra-* in all its inflected forms used in the Gathas except for Y43.14, where its inflected form is fem., from the fem. stem *mąθrā-* p. 153. Why this one word should be grammatically both masc. and fem. I haven't the foggiest idea. The reason(s) may well be historical. As Mr. Justice Holmes has said, 'In understanding the law, a page of history is worth a volume of logic'. And I think the same is true in understanding languages.

² Taraporewala 1951, p. 191.

³ Taraporewala 1951 comments that GAv. *mąθra-* is Skt. *mantra-*, and that Bartholomae derives the word from *man-* 'to think'. p. 66. Skjaervo 2006, also shows *mąθra-* deriving from *man-*.

⁴ Mills translates manthra as 'words of reason' in the following YAv. texts. The words in round parentheses are Mills' own words indicating his translations of the terms.

In the Visperad

"...praise of the Māthra Spenta (the bounteous word of reason)..." *Visperad* 9.7, SBE 31, p. 355; Mills translates *spənta-* as 'bounteous' rather than 'beneficial', (as discussed in *Part One: The Beneficial-Sacred Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*).

"...and we sacrifice ... to every Māthra (as to a sacred word of reason)..." *Visperad* 13.1, SBE 31, p. 355;

So also *Visperad* 21.1 SBE 31, p. 362.

In the YAv. Yasna

"And we worship the Māthra-spenta (the bounteous word-of-reason), the Zarathushtrian law against the Daevas, and its long descent." Yy17.13, SBE 31, p. 259.

Some scholars have concluded that the reference in this Yy17.13, (and other YAv. Yasnas) to "the Zarathushtrian law against the Daevas" refers to the *Vendidad* (Vi-dev-dat 'the law that sets aside, or resists, the daevas), because of its title. But this conclusion is not accurate for two reasons.

From a linguistic point of view, the *Vendidad* was composed much later than Yy17.13 (quoted above) and other YAv. texts which speak of the 'Zarathushtrian law against the Daevas'. We know this to be a fact, because the *Vendidad* contains serious grammatical errors (Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, (1961, Phoenix Press reprint 2003) p. 162), indicating that the *Vendidad* was composed long after Avestan times, when the composer(s) of the *Vendidad* were not fluent in the Avestan language.

Hintze thinks the *Vendidad* was written in the post-Achaemenian period (Hintze (1994), *Zamyad Yasht*, p. 9). And indeed, Darmesteter in his Introduction expresses the opinion that parts of the *Vendidad* were written as late as Sasanian times (SBE 5, pp. xxxvii - xli).

In light of all this evidence, the phrase "the Māthra-spenta (the beneficial word of reason), the Zarathushtrian law against the Daevas" in Yy17.3 quoted above (which *was* composed during Avestan times) obviously could not have meant a text not yet in existence (the *Vendidad* composed after Avestan times) and could only have been a reference to the Gathas themselves ~ corroborated by the fact that the Gathas themselves speak explicitly and repeatedly against the cruel gods of Zarathushtra's society which in the Gathas are called daevas. Thus Zarathushtra's teachings are ~ quite literally ~ 'against the daevas'. Moreover, the teachings of the Gathas are very, very different from most of the teachings in the *Vendidad*. See *Part Five: The Vendidad and its Lessons for Today*.

⁵ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1988), where the word is spelled 'mantra'.

⁶ That 'manthra' in Zoroastrian texts is used as the word of Wisdom (*mazdā-*) is corroborated in a YAv. text which, referring to the Yatha Ahu Vairyo states, Mills' translation,

"...It is the word of Mazda. ... It is the Mathra-spenta word, the unsubdued, the undeceived, the victorious, the opponent of malice, the healing and victorious word of Mazda..." Younger Avestan Fragment 9, SBE Vol. 31, p. 393. Notice the identity of what is opposed.

⁷ The word *mąθra-*/*mąθrā-* in its inflected case/number forms appears in the Gatha verses Y31.6, Y31.18, Y43.14, Y44.14, Y44.17, and Y45.3 where Insler 1975 translates the word as 'precept(s)'.

It also appears in Y28.5, where Insler 1975 translates it as 'prayer'. And it appears in Y29.7, where Insler 1975 translates it as 'promise' but comments that it means 'precept' and discusses its various shades of meaning (pp. 153 - 154). Manthra in the sense of a promise is easy to understand when we consider that Wisdom's 'promise' of nurture in Y29 is His teachings (precepts).

⁸ Discussed in *Part One: Meditation & Contemplation*.

⁹ The word *mąθrān-* in its inflected case forms appears in the Gathas in Y32.13, Y50.5, Y50.6, and Y51.8, and has been translated (interpretively) as follows.

Insler translates *mąθrān-* as 'prophet';

Taraporewala 1951 as 'singer or chanter of hymns' (pp. 293, 745), and 'singer' (p. 745);

Humbach 1991 as 'disciple' (Vol. 1, pp. 135, 184, and 188);

Beekes 1988 as 'poet' (p. 120).

Humbach/Faiss 2010 as 'poet' (pp. 94, 150, 154).

¹⁰ See *Part One: The Search for Truth, Asha*.

¹¹ See *Part One: The Beneficial-Sacred Way of Being*.

¹² Discussed in *Part Three: Evolution of the Name(s) Mazda, Ahura*.

¹³ The *Farvardin Yasht* speaks of the "Fravashi of Ahura Mazda" (i.e. the divine essence of the Lord Wisdom) - using many flowery (and largely inconsequential) adjectives to describe it. But (as so often happens in the YAv. texts) among such things, we find some gems which reflect the thought of the Gathas. And in this Yasht, among the adjectives describing the fravashi of Wisdom, the author says,

"Whose soul is the Māthra Spenta [*yejhe urva mąθrō spəntō*]..." § 81, Darmesteter translation, SBE 23, p. 199; Avestan words from Geldner 2P p. 185. The word *urvan-* is used in GAv. (as in Vedic) in the sense of 'soul' and 'self' (Insler 1975 p. 123, commenting under Y28.4.).

¹⁴ The importance of these three 'prayers' in ancient times, is demonstrated by the following evidence (in part). By Pahlavi times the Gathas and YAv. texts were written down and recited as part of the ritual. And in numerous places, at the ends of various sections of these Avestan texts, the ritual requires the repeated recital of one or more prayers, of which these three - which by then were called by the first few words of their respective names the Ashem Vohu, the Yatha Ahu Vairyo and the Yenghe Hatam - are the ones most often required to be recited.

