

Quick Definitions

The name by which Zarathushtra most often calls the Divine is 'Wisdom' (*mazdā-*). And he also calls Him 'Lord' (*ahura-*), and the 'Lord (who is) Wisdom' or 'Wisdom, the Lord' (*mazdā- ahura-*).¹

And Zarathushtra uses seven key concepts which to him are the essence of divinity ~ the qualities that make a being divine. These seven concepts are also the path to the Divine ~ Wisdom's paradigm of a good existence (in Zarathushtra's opinion). In the Gathic Avestan language (in stem form), these seven concepts are encapsulated in the following seven words:

aša-,

vohu- manah-,

ārmaiti-,

vohu- xšaθra-,

haurvatāt-,

aməratāt-, and

spənta- mainyu-;

I use the collective term *amesha spenta*, as a convenient short-hand way to refer to these seven concepts (although opinions differ regarding whether they are six or seven in the later texts).² But this collective term (*amesha spenta*) does not appear in the Gathas. The term *amesha spenta* literally means non-dying (*aməša-*) beneficial-sacred (*spənta-*) (ones).³

It is a mark of Zarathushtra's genius that with these seven concepts, (the *amesha spenta*), he encapsulates each core element of his spiritual philosophy,⁴ specifically:

The nature of the Divine,

The nature of man (and perhaps all the living), and their relationship with the Divine,

How 'good' and 'evil' are defined,

The object of worship, and the way to worship,

How evil is defeated and the purpose of life is defined and fulfilled,

The the path and its reward,

How 'salvation' and 'paradise' are defined and attained.

Are you skeptical?

Well, if what I say is true, then at least you can see the importance of understanding the meanings that Zarathushtra has in mind for these seven key concepts (the *amesha spenta*) that are so central to his thought.

Linguists are in substantial disagreement regarding the meanings of many of these seven concepts. The definitions I give here are linguistically defensible, and fit all of the ways in which these words are used in the Gathas ~ the micro context of each verse in which they are used as well as the macro context of the Gathas as a whole.

In the chapters of *Part One* that immediately follow, I explore their meanings in detail ~ touching briefly on the opinions of linguists as a base line, and then showing the evidence of how Zarathushtra uses these words, to figure out the meanings he has in mind. These details may not be of interest to the reader who wishes to get only a bird's eye view of Zarathushtra's thought. Such readers, after reading the quick definitions in this chapter, may prefer to skip the chapters which define the amesha spenta in detail, and go straight to the chapters that follow in *Part One*.

But if you want to understand the depth and beauty of Zarathushtra's thought, then a more complete understanding these seven terms is essential, and you will need to see the evidence of how Zarathushtra uses these terms, in order to assure yourself that the meanings given are indeed his, in which event you will find chapters 3 through 8 indispensable.

Chapter 3 also discusses, with evidence, whether or not Zarathushtra believed in cosmic dualism ~ a belief in two uncreated 'gods', one all good and the other all evil ~ a topic that is of particular interest to many who have studied the history of Zoroastrianism. The evidence shows that he did not. Cosmic dualism (while a courageous attempt to be rational), was an invention of later Zoroastrianism expressed in Pahlavi texts that were written 200 + years after the Arab invasion of Iran. By the time these texts were written, much knowledge had been lost following the killing of the learned and the burning of texts, and the Zoroastrians writers who wrote about cosmic dualism had absorbed the belief of the dominant religion under which they lived that the Divine is a being separate and apart from Its creation ~ a belief that is at odds with Zarathushtra's idea of the in-dwelling Divine which in my view is very beautiful and eminently rational (the way Zarathushtra arrives at it ~ detailed in *Part One: The Identity Of The Divine*).

You well may question why even the short definitions in this chapter require many English words to define one Gathic Avestan word. Well, there often is not one word in a language that has a one-word equivalent in another language. And this is true of many Gathic Avestan words. Most of these seven terms (the amesha spenta) do not have an adequate one-word or two-word word English equivalent. So to understand Zarathushtra's ideas, we need to bear in mind the full meaning of a given word each time a one-word English equivalent is used in a quotation from the Gathas. I also have included here a quick definition for the allegorical *gao-* 'cow', the detailed evidence for which is discussed in *Part Two*.⁵

Here are the quick definitions. In the Gathas, these concepts are qualities of the Divine, some of which also exist in man, and all of which man is capable of attaining completely.

aša- (pronounced *asha*, with the first and last 'a' both short). 'Truth' is the nearest one-word English equivalent for *aša-* ~ 'truth' in the sense of the true (correct) order in the existences of matter and mind, which in Zarathushtra's thought is a wholly good order of existence (*aša- vahišta-*).

In the existence of matter, the true (correct) order means factual truths ~ what is factually correct in our material existence, which includes the laws that order our physical world, the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, et cetera. You well may question: Isn't the material existence ethically neutral ~ neither 'good' nor 'bad'? How can the material existence be 'wholly good'? This puzzled me as well. It took a long time for me to understand what Zarathushtra means when

he says that the existence has been ordered in a wholly good way. I have detailed (my understanding of) his ideas on this point in other chapters.⁶

In the existence of mind, the true (correct) order means abstract truths ~ all that is right (correct), which in the Gathas includes such notions as honesty, goodness, reason, generosity, beneficence, lovingkindness, solicitude, friendship, compassion, justice (as in being fair), et cetera – all of which are a part of the true, (correct) order in the existence of mind, the abstract existence.

As such, it includes healing the world, by benefitting, supporting, not harming, not injuring. And it includes the law of consequences (i.e. an order that delivers 'what fits' for each action ~ that we reap what we sow, that everything we do comes back to us ~ the purpose of which is beneficial ~ not punitive ~ to increase understanding, to enlighten, to enable our spiritual evolution from a mixed (good/bad) state of being to one that is wholly good.⁷

Most important of all, the true (correct) order of existence is equated with the quality of being *spənta-* 'beneficial', and with the quality of intrinsic goodness *vohu-* 'good', and its superlative degree 'most-good' *vahišta-*. In the Gathas, these qualities are the essence of the sacred, the Divine.

vohu- manah- means good mind (the faculty), good thinking (the process), and good thought (the product),⁸ ~ depending on the context in which these words appear.

vohu- manah- means comprehending the true (correct) order in the existences of matter and mind (*aša-*) ~ incrementally, and eventually completely;

vohu- manah- includes not only good intellectual functions but also good emotions, creativity, insight et cetera ~ the full spectrum of good (awake) conscious capabilities ~ as the evidence of the Gathas establishes.⁹ In other words, the Avestan meaning of *manah-* is not limited to intellectual functions, which is the way 'mind', 'thinking' and 'thought' are most often used in English.

ārmaiti- (pronounced in 4 syllables aa-ra-mai-ti) has been translated by professional linguists and others in various (irreconcilable) ways. Based on the ways in which Zarathushtra uses the word, it mean thoughts, words, and actions that embody the true (good) order of existence (*aša-*). There is no one-word English equivalent. The term 'embodied truth' is the closest short hand definition for *ārmaiti-*.

vohu- xšaθra- means 'good rule' ~ a governance that is in accordance with the good, true (correct) order of existence (*aša-*), its comprehension (good thinking *vohu-manah*), and its beneficial embodiment in thought, word and action (*spənta-ārmaiti-*) ~ in our selves, and in our many social units, the family, the community, the nation, the world (existence). This good rule is sometimes also called 'the rule to be chosen' (*xšaθra- vairya-*).

haurvatāt- means completeness, wholeness; *haurvatāt-* is used by Zarathushtra in two ways:

~ at an individual level as the complete attainment of the good, beneficial, true order of existence ~ its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule (all of which are attributes of the divine, amesha spenta), and also

~ at a collective level, as wholeness, completeness of being, a wholeness that embraces all the living.

aməratāt- literally means non-deathness. The prefix *a-* is a negative prefix, and means 'not' or 'non'; *mərə(ta-)* is from the Avestan root 'to die', and the suffix *-tāt* means '-ness' ~ a condition of being. In the Gathas, non-deathness (*aməratāt-*) is used in the sense of an existence that is not bound by mortality ~ mortal existence being the arena for the soul perfecting process. So once a being has attained completely, the true (correct, wholly good) order of existence (*haurvatāt-*), the reason for mortality ceases to exist, the being is no longer bound by mortality, and a state of non-deathness (*aməratāt-*) is attained. I think this is why these two words (*haurvatāt-* and *aməratāt-*) are so often used together in the Gathas.

The usual translation 'immortality' does not fit the ways in which Zarathushtra uses the word.¹⁰

spənta- The closest English equivalent is 'beneficial'. But based on the ways in which Zarathushtra uses the word, its meaning includes a good, generous, bountiful, loving, reasoning, way of being that is the essence of the true order of existence (*aša-*), the essence of what is good, the essence of what is sacred, divine.

mainyu- The closest English equivalent is a 'way of being', based on all of the ways in which Zarathushtra uses the word. This 'way of being' includes the totality of thought, word, and action.

The usual translations 'spirit' and 'mentality' fall far short of the ways in which Zarathushtra uses the word.

aməša- spənta- (pronounced with each *ə* short as in 'met'). These two words literally mean 'non-dying', 'beneficial'. Both words are adjectives. But in Avestan, adjectives can also be used as nouns, indicating a concept, person, or thing that has the qualities of a given adjective. The term *aməša- spənta-* (which does not appear in the Gathas) is a collective short-hand term which comprises the qualities that make a being divine

~ the true (correct, good) order of existence (*aša-*),

~ its comprehension, good thinking (*vohu- manah-*),

~ its embodiment in thought, word and action (*ārmaiti-*),

~ its good rule (*vohu- xšaθra-*),

~ its complete attainment, a state of being not bound by mortality (*haurvatāt-aməratāt-*),

~ comprising the wholly beneficial way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*),

~ Wisdom personified (*mazdā-* ~ the name for the Divine most used by Zarathushtra).

In the Gathas, these qualities which comprise the amesha spenta appear,

~ most often as concepts
 ~ also as attributes of the Divine,
 ~ also as attributes that man has imperfectly, and is capable of attaining them all completely; and
 ~ least frequently as allegorical entities.

In the later texts they came to be considered as actual, living entities, which is not consistent with the evidence of the Gathas.

gao- means 'cow'; Zarathushtra uses 'cow' as an allegory representing the beneficial in mortal existence, ~ a beneficial existence (*spənta- mainyu-*) which is governed (*x šaθra-*) by truth, goodness, all that is right (*aša-*), its comprehension (*vohu- manah-*), and its beneficial embodiment in thought, word and action (*spənta- ārmaiti-*) ~ an existence which in Zarathushtra's view is Wisdom's good envisionment (*vañuhī daēnā*) of the way we should live our lives, the path of truth, (*daēnā-* later became *dīn*, and came to mean 'religion').

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¹ These names are discussed in more detail in *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*. I am indebted to Professor Schwartz who, in an internet posting, suggested this way of translating Ahura Mazda 'the Lord (who is) Wisdom'.

² The amesha spenta are itemized in various YAv. texts as detailed in a footnote in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Amesha Spenta*. In many of these later texts, the amesha spenta came to be seen as living entities. But in a few, they still are treated as divine qualities. Some scholars have questioned whether the ancients intended *səraoša-* also to be one of the amesha spenta. I do not think they did. Sraoša is not shown in the Gathas, or in the later texts, as an attribute of the Divine. It is not enumerated with the other six, whenever the amesha spenta are enumerated in the later texts. The word *səraoša-* literally means 'listening and implementing'. It is used in connection with the Wisdom's teachings (which are the path of truth the path of the amesha spenta), detailed in *Part Three: Seraoša*.

³ There is some dispute as to whether, historically, *spənta- mainyu-* is an amesha spenta. The evidence of the Gathas shows that *spənta- mainyu-* is indeed Wisdom's way of being. It is a way of being that comprises the true (correct) order of existence (*aša-*), its comprehension, good thinking (*vohu- manah-*), its beneficial embodiment in thought, word and action (*spənta- ārmaiti-*), its good rule (*vohu- x šaθra-*), its complete and undying attainment (*haurvatāt- amərətāt-*) ~ all of which comprise the wholly beneficial-sacred way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*), which is the way of being of the Divine ~ Wisdom personified (*mazdā-*). So *spənta- mainyu-* is a quality of the Divine which includes all the other six divine qualities. Similarly, *aša-* 'the true order of existence' includes its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule. So all seven (including *spənta- mainyu-*) are essentially divine qualities ~ the qualities that make a being divine. This question is discussed in more detail in a ft. in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Amesha Spenta*.

⁴ See *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Amesha Spenta*.

⁵ See *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Cow and its Network*.

⁶ See *Part One: A Friendly Universe*, and *Part Two: Asha & the Checkmate Solution*.

⁷ See *Part Two: Asha and the Checkmate Solution*.

⁸ I am indebted to Professor Insler for this explanation of how *manah-* is used in the Gathas. His ideas are discussed in *Part One: Good Thinking, Vohu Manah*.

⁹ Detailed in *Part One: Good Thinking, Vohu Manah*.

¹⁰ Detailed in *Part One: Completeness & Non-Deathness, Haurvatat, Ameretat*.