

## The Freedom to Choose

R. G. Ingersoll, who may never have heard of Zarathushtra, is reputed to have said,

"Without liberty there is no religion ~ no worship. What light is to the eyes, what air is to the lungs, what love is to the heart, liberty is to the soul of man."<sup>1</sup>

More than 2,000 years before Ingersoll, Zarathushtra, came to the same conclusion,<sup>2</sup> ~ indicating that some ideas are universal truths.

In our own times ~ in the last few decades of the 20th century ~ the sweet breath of liberty swept over our planet, and millions of individuals, in stunning displays of courage and determination, demonstrated again and again, often at severe cost, (and not always successfully) that the human spirit hungers for the freedom to choose.<sup>3</sup>

Zarathushtra, who lived in times of oppression, violence, tyranny, bondage, concluded that these qualities are not in accord with the true (correct) order of existence (*aṣa-*). His revolution was a revolution of ideas. A new way of thinking (for his time).<sup>4</sup>

The freedom to choose is a fundament, a core teaching, of Zarathushtra's thought,<sup>5</sup> a necessary ingredient for spiritual and social growth. He teaches that we need to make choices (even the failure to choose is a choice). Through our choices (the 'good' ones and the 'bad' ones) we gain experience. Through experience we gain wisdom.<sup>6</sup> Of course this raises the questions: How should we make our choices? And what should we choose?

*How we make choices.*

We have already seen that Zarathushtra does not claim to have fact-specific answers, but instead tells us to search for truth, a search in which he also is engaged.<sup>7</sup> The freedom to think for ourselves, and make choices (including mistakes), is necessary to any meaningful search for truth. In a break from traditional notions of religious dogma, Zarathushtra does not command us to obey without question the dictates of any religious authority.

He tells us that we should listen to what is most good [*vahišta-*] ~ the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness ~ which the later texts called 'wisdom acquired by the ear', but that ultimately, we have the freedom, and the responsibility, of making our own choices ~ independently, on an individual basis ~ and that we must do so with clear minds (recalling how Zarathushtra uses 'mind' to include not only intellectual functions, but the full spectrum of conscious (awake) capabilities ~ intellectual, emotional, creative, insightful etc.),<sup>8</sup> reflecting what the later texts called the 'wisdom within'. He says,

"Listen with your ears to the best things [*vahišta-* 'most-good (things)']. Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man for himself ~ upon the two choices of decision ..." Y30:2, Insler 1975.<sup>9</sup> The two choices of decision are between truth and untruth.

This verse (among others) teaches individual responsibility. The collective excuse (*I am only following orders*, or *This is the way it has always been*) is not an available option in Zarathushtra's thought.

In the Gathas, we have the concept of *səraoša-* 'listening'. The ways in which Zarathushtra uses *səraoša-* shows that (as in English) 'listening' means 'hearing and implementing' ~ of one's own free will ~ not the authoritarian perception of unquestioning obedience that is usually associated with religious belief,<sup>10</sup> (including some later Zoroastrian texts).

In fact, with pleasing consistency, even when he prays for guidance from the Divine, it is through good thinking that he asks to be instructed, 'May the Giver of reason [*x ratu-*] instruct through good thinking (the course of) my direction (so as) to be (the) charioteer of (my) tongue.' Y50:6, my translation. An interesting paradox ~ wanting Wisdom to direct him but only through good thinking ~ a process that includes reason, ascertaining and understanding the true order of existence for himself.

The tolerance that enables free choice is also reflected in Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine "...Him who left to our will (to choose between) the [*spāncā* 'beneficial'] and the [*aspāncā* 'non-beneficial'] ..." Y45:9, Insler 1975.<sup>11</sup>

In Zarathushtra's thought, no authority ~ human or Divine ~ has the right to demand of us blind, unquestioning obedience. And this is eminently sane. Understanding does not come through blind obedience. When the Divine is made known to us through human faculties and agencies, all such intermediaries (being human) are fallible. They can (and do!) make mistakes. It is better by far to make our own mistakes, than to live the mistakes of others in blind obedience. It is only when we think for ourselves, make choices, make mistakes and learn from our mistakes that our understanding grows, that we get closer to comprehending the true (correct) order of existence. Real understanding has to come from within us, become a part of us.

On the other hand, if we institutionalize, venerate, and follow without thought or question, the ideas (and mistakes) of others, how do we grow? How do we learn? A slave mentality is not conducive to wisdom.

*What we choose.*

At one level, we choose 'truth' instead of 'untruth' which includes 'good' instead of 'evil', 'right' instead of 'wrong' what is true instead of what is false, knowledge instead of ignorance. Easier said than done, because it is not always easy to figure out what is 'good, true, and right' in a given situation ~ which is why we have to search for truth ~ an incremental process.

But we find a more meaningful framework for choice in Zarathushtra's perception of the values that make a being divine ~ the beneficial-sacred way of being (*spānta- mainyu-*), which is the essence of the sacred, and is the wholly good true (correct) order of existence (*aša- vahišta-*) and its component parts ~ its comprehension good thinking (*vohu- manah-*), its beneficial-sacred embodiment in thought, word and action (*spānta- ārmaiti*), its good rule (*vohu- x šaθra-*), which comprise w/Wisdom personified (*mazdā-*), ~ truth personified, an enlightened existence.

Each time we choose these qualities, we choose the Divine. We bring the Divine to life, in ourselves, and in our world.

The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) manthra has been described in later texts as a magical formula for defeating evil. The first few words of this manthra tell us (among other things) that we should choose both the object of our worship (the Lord), and also our judgments (our thinking), in accord with truth indeed (*ašaṇcī hacā*).<sup>12</sup>

So each time we translate our good thoughts into words and actions that embody the true, (correct) good order of existence, we bring to life the 'magic' Ahuna Vairya formula for defeating ignorance, falsehood, untruth, violence, oppression, and all the other 'evils' that comprise wrongful choices, thereby 'saving' ourselves and our world.

One who does so is Zarathushtra's idea of a 'savior' (*saošyānt-*).<sup>13</sup>

"Yes, those men shall be the saviors [*saošyant-*] of the lands, namely, those who shall follow their knowledge of Thy teaching with actions in harmony with good thinking and with truth, Wise One. These indeed have been fated to be the expellers of fury." Y48:12, Insler 1975.

In this verse, the enemy to be expelled is not a competing tribe, or even competing 'gods'. The enemy is a wrongful way of being ~ 'fury, rage' ~ the mind-set which interferes with comprehending truth (good thinking) ~ generating violence and inflicting harm.<sup>14</sup> This verse requires the conclusion that all good people are worthy of respect ~ an idea that is corroborated in later Avestan texts, (a few examples are footnoted).<sup>15</sup>

To me, this undogmatic dogma ~ the search for truth and the freedom to choose ~ is a lovely and endearing aspect of Zarathushtra's thought. It enables the on-going acquisition of knowledge. It enables personal and societal growth. It generates tolerance and respect for others, and for ourselves.

This undogmatic dogma is an expression of confidence ~ that in spite of our many limitations and shortcomings, each one of us, being free to choose, has what it takes to bring the divine to life ~ in ourselves and in our world. We have what it takes to ultimately make it.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Ingersoll, *Progress*, (1860, 1864) published on the Internet by [www.infidels.org](http://www.infidels.org). Ingersoll, born in New York, in 1833 was a younger contemporary of Abraham Lincoln.

Almost 100 years earlier, in 1775, when men were debating whether to take up arms to fight for independence (in what was later to become the United States of America) Patrick Henry said: "... Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" Patrick Henry's concept of 'liberty' did not include people of color, or women. But, in the history of evolving thought, it was a good step in the right direction.

<sup>2</sup> Many historians of western civilization see the ancient Greeks as the genesis of 'western' values including personal freedoms. And they portray the wars between various Greek states and the Iranian Achaemenians as representing a conflict between 'western' values (read freedom and democracy), and 'eastern' values (read despotism and slavery).

But, like many generalizations, this is far from the truth.

The ancient Greeks bought, sold, and owned slaves, as was the case in many ancient cultures. Plutarch's *Lives of famous Greeks and Romans* (2015 Benediction Classics, Oxford, Editor Arthur Clough), shows that it was a common practice among the Greeks and Romans to enslave conquered peoples ~ not doing so was considered an exception (often for reasons of policy).

By contrast, the Achaemenian kings did not enslave conquered peoples. Cyrus the Great freed the Jews as well as other minorities from Babylon, allowed them all to return to their homelands, and with money to help rebuild their temples and sanctuaries. The Achaemenian palace at Persepolis was built by workers (including women) who were not slaves, who were scrupulously paid on an ascending scale based on the kind of work done ~ manual labor, skilled craftsman, supervisor (as the Persepolis Fortification & Treasury Tablets and other archeological finds detail).

During the Archaic and Classical periods of Greek history, the word 'tyrant' was a title of certain ancient Greek rulers, meaning someone who ruled absolutely (not necessarily badly). If you read Plutarch's *Lives* you will see how far removed from 'western values' were the practices of many, many Greek and Roman rulers. But running through these narratives we also see the desire for liberty, and that goodness and right conduct were valued ~ indicating to me that these values are neither 'western' nor 'eastern', but are universal values that all humans have striven for in the many ups and downs of history.

Now it is true that many ancient Iranian monarchs were absolute rulers. So too were almost all ancient hereditary rulers ~ European and Eastern. But (Professor Holland to the contrary notwithstanding) Iranian monarchs were not

supposed to rule in whatever way they pleased, or in a way that made their subjects slaves. We see many bits and pieces of evidence that the freedom to choose was an integral part of ancient Iranian thinking in more ways than one. Here are a few such bits and pieces of evidence.

According to the Cambridge History of Iran (CHI), the ancient Medes (before Astyges) elected their rulers ~ perhaps not by universal suffrage, perhaps by the votes of various clan heads or chiefs, but by some form of elections. The name of their ancient capital (at one time a field) was Agbatana, or Ekbatana, which meant 'meeting place' or 'place of assembly' where such rulers were elected. And during the Assyrian Empire, after the Assyrians had conquered Media, the Medes had to give an oath of submission in which one of the "treacherous" actions justifying severe punishment, was described as "if you convoke a (popular) assembly, swear to one another and confer the royal power on one from your [own] midst." CHI 1985, Vol. 2, p. 109, and ftn. 2 on that page. (Words in round parentheses and square brackets are in the original quotation).

A YAv. text, Yy8:8, says,

"I pray for the freedom and glory of the entire existence of the [*aṣaonō* 'truth-possessing']..." Yy8:8, Mills translation, SBE 31, p. 230 (Mills translates *aṣa-*/*aṣavan-* words as 'holy' instead of 'truth/truthful').

An Avestan text, the *Vendidad* written long after Avestan times, (when our priests were no longer fluent in Avestan) nevertheless recounts an ancient legend which states that the Lord Wisdom (Ahura Mazda) asked Yima (Jamsheed) to be the teacher and bearer of His law, but Yima declined, stating that he was not born to be a preacher, nor taught to be one. Did the Lord Wisdom hurl a thunderbolt at him, or otherwise punish him for his disobedience and independence? Not at all. He not only respected Yima's freedom to choose, He offered him another way of doing good, saying in effect, well if you wont teach my Word, how about taking care of my world as king, to which Yima agreed. And notice the language that describes how a good ruler should rule ~ for the benefit of the ruled, not by exploiting or enslaving them. This is how the story is told in that later text (Ahura Mazda purportedly speaking ~ in a story telling way).

"3. Unto him O Zarathushtra, I Ahura Mazda spake saying: 'Well, fair Yima, son of Vivanghat, be thou the preacher and bearer of my law!'

And the fair Yima, O Zarathushtra, replied unto me saying:

'I was not born, I was not taught, to be the preacher and the bearer of thy law.'

4. Then I, Ahura Mazda, said thus unto him O Zarathushtra,

'Since thou wantest not to be the preacher and the bearer of my law, then make thou my worlds thrive, make my worlds increase: undertake thou to nourish, to rule, and to watch over my world.'

5. And the fair Yima replied unto me O Zarathushtra saying:

'Yes! I will make thy worlds thrive, I will make thy worlds increase. Yes! I will nourish, and rule, and watch over thy world. There shall be, while I am king, neither cold wind nor hot wind, neither disease, nor death.' " *Vendidad*, Ch. 2, §§ 3 - 5, Darmesteter translation, SBE 4 p. 12.

An optimistic king! Needless to say this was simply a later story-teller's way of recounting an ancient legend. The importance of this Avestan story for our purposes is not whether the Lord Wisdom had such a conversation with Yima. Its importance lies in the fact that it demonstrates to a high degree, the ancient Iranian mind-set regarding the freedom to choose ~ even to the extent of saying 'thanks, but no thanks,' to the Divine, and the Divine's response.

Its importance also lies in demonstrating the qualities of good rule ~ "... make thou my worlds thrive, ... undertake thou to nourish, to rule, and to watch over my world." A reflection of good rule (*vohu- xšaθra-*) in the Gathas (the added parts about winds, disease and death were simply the embroidery of story tellers). This mind-set of how a ruler should rule is very far removed from the popular view held today of ancient Iranian kings as despots, having a ruler/slave relationship with their subjects ~ a view held even by some academicians (influenced perhaps by the opinions of ancient historians who belonged to countries that were the enemies of Iran). There doubtless were 'bad' Iranian kings, as there have been throughout history in all countries.

The value placed on independent mindedness also runs throughout the Persian Shahnamah which recounts many legends of ancient Iran. For example, the warrior Geev, hurling defiance at his enemies identified himself as,

"...I am the independent minded Geev, son of Goodarz ..." Surti, *Shahnamah of Firdaosi*, (1986) Vol. 2, p. 264.

An interesting way for a warrior to identify himself ~ not as courageous, or strong, or mighty or victorious in battle, but as 'independent minded'.

And when King Kaikhosrov asked his nobles to undertake a course of action with which they agreed, their agreement was expressed with great courtesy, but also with a reminder to their monarch that they were independent minded (the thorn with the rose).

"O king! keep your heart happy and always free from sorrow. Our bodies and souls are at your disposal... We ... are your servants, although we are independent minded." Surti, *ibid.* p. 286.

Those historians, archeologists, and scholars who assume that ancient Iranians (before Islam) were in effect the slaves of their kings, need to revisit the legends and texts of ancient Iran with open minds. Equally important, they need to understand the idioms of ancient courtesy. And they need to read 'histories' written by the enemies of ancient Iran with at least an open, questioning mind.

<sup>3</sup> In the last decades of the 20th century, through the magic of television, we saw unarmed individuals in the Philipines, demonstrating for their rights by blocking tanks and placing flowers in the muzzles of guns. We saw in China, individuals in Tienanmen Square, from all walks of life, old and young, placing their lives on the line (unsuccessfully) for a dream of freedom (who could ever forget the TV coverage of that young man confronting a tank with a briefcase?!). We saw East Germans vault embassy walls for freedom. We saw people tearing down that symbol of oppression, the Berlin Wall. We saw the demise of a world power ~ the Soviet Union ~ the totalitarian governments it controlled in Eastern Europe falling, one by one, as millions of people took to the streets, with candles in their hands (and fire in their hearts!), expressing their hunger for liberty, demonstrating that the freedom to choose is as essential to the human spirit as food is to the body ~ all captured on live television.

And more recently, in the first few years of the 21st century, people in the Middle East have risked death and brutality to overthrow despotic rulers ~ sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully ~ even where the chances of success seemed very small. In Iran, the birthplace of Zarathushtra, thousands of people risked brutality and death in the streets, and imprisonment and torture, to protest (unsuccessfully for now) their loss of freedom ~ declaring their commitment by wearing green ~ green wrist bands, green shirts, and other green things.

The struggle for freedom ~ political, social, religious ~ is an on-going human phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the tyranny and despotism against which Zarathushtra rebelled in the Gathas, Professor K. D. Irani has perceptively pointed out in his lectures, that in the kind of tribal society in which Zarathushtra lived, an individual was required to follow the rules of the tribe (which were usually made by its priests and secular chiefs). He was not permitted to think and act for himself, if such thoughts and actions conflicted with tribal rules and requirements. And severe consequences accrued to anyone who opted to think and act independently, against such tribal rules. So Zarathushtra's idea of individual freedom was a radical, new idea for his time period ~ an idea for which he was persecuted and ostracized.

<sup>5</sup> That the freedom to choose is a core teaching of Zarathushtra's thought, is corroborated by later texts. Here are some examples.

In Archaic Younger Avestan, Yy58:3 describes the religion as one of choices.

"...In this worship do we exercise our choices..." Yy58:3, Mills translation, SBE 31, p. 307.

And other declarations of religious commitment include declarations of choice. We see this not only in what we know today as the *Jasa Me Avanghe Mazda* prayer (which is a quotation from the last two words of archaic YAv. Yasna 12:7, through §§ 8 and 9, quoted in part in *Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds*, on the Home Page of this website).

We also see the following additional declaration of choice (also from Yy12), quoted in later Avestan texts, in the Intro. to the *Hormezd (Ormazd) Yasht*; and in the *Gah Rapithwan*, etc.

... *fravarānē mazdayasnō zaraθuštriš vīdaēvō ahura.ṭkaēšō* ...

'... I choose to be a wisdom-worshipper, (an envisionment) generated by Zarathushtra, daeva-rejecting, the Lord's teaching...' my translation.

The word *vīdaēvō* means 'daeva-rejecting', or 'daeva-resisting'. In Zarathushtra's culture *daēva-* was a generic word for the 'deities' of the religions of his time period. Zarathushtra rejected the deities of his society whose priests were predatory, oppressive and caused suffering. But centuries later, by the time of the YAv. texts, *daēva-* meant 'demon', and the names of many YAv. 'demons' were different kinds of human vices, so 'daeva-rejecting', or 'daeva-resisting', meant resisting or rejecting the vices that were these demons within (detailed in *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?*).

In another YAv. text, a good ruler is described as one who does not exercise wonton or despotic power (the opposite of having the freedom to choose),

"... As holy [*ašavanəm* 'truth-possessing'] and best [*vahištō-* 'most good'], a ruler who exercises no wanton or despotic power." Yy19:20, Mills translation in SBE 31, p. 266; the Avestan words in square brackets are from Geldner 1P p. 79, with my translation.

Mills chooses the English adjectives 'holy' and 'best', for the Avestan words which show that the qualities of such a ruler are the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness [*vahišta-* 'most good'], and possessing the true order of existence (*ašavanəm* which literally means 'truth-possessing') ~ both of which are (in this verse) shown as the opposite of the exercise of wonton or despotic power (i.e. power which crushes the freedom to choose). Thus we see corroboration in this later YAv. text that wanton or despotic power is not in accord with the true (correct) order of existence (*aša-*).

<sup>6</sup> Discussed in *Part Two: Asha and the Checkmate Solution*; and *Did Mazda Choose Too?*

<sup>7</sup> See *Part One: The Search for Truth*.

<sup>8</sup> Zarathushtra uses 'mind', 'thinking', 'thought', to include the full spectrum of consciousness ~ reason and other intellectual functions, as well as creativity, emotions, insight, and other non-intellectual functions; detailed in *Part One: Good Thinking Vohu Manah*.

<sup>9</sup> This is a multi-dimensioned verse which is foundational and has some lovely things to say. For a discussion of its meaning(s), its linguistics, various commentaries, my translation and those of professional linguists for comparative purposes, see *Six: Yasna 30:2*.

I translate this verse (as literally as possible) as follows, 'Listen with (your) ears to (all that is) most good ; reflect with a light-filled mind upon (the) two choices of decision, man by man for himself, being aware to declare our (selves) for it (truth) by means of (the) great race/contest.' Y30:2. The metaphor of 'great race/contest' is the race between truth and untruth, the good and bad ways of being within ourselves.

The (metaphoric) race course extends over the course of our lives. This verse tells us how we should decide between these two ways of being, and that we should commit to (declare for) the true order of existence, in order for the good within us to win the race.

Insler (1975) translates the full verse as follows, "Listen with your ears to the best things [*vahišta-* 'most-good (things)']. Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man for himself ~ upon the two choices of decision, being aware to declare yourselves to Him before the great retribution [*yāñhō*]." Y30:2, Insler 1975.

Insler's translation of *yāñhō* as 'retribution' is at best a guess (as he acknowledges), but (with respect) one which does not fit either the micro context of this verse and Yasna, or the macro context of Zarathushtra's thought in the Gathas. Linguists are in substantial disagreement regarding the translation of *yāñhō*. I am persuaded by the reasoning (and evidence) of H. P. Schmidt that *yāñhō* is a racing term used here (as in other verses) as a metaphor, which Insler 1975 agrees is fully defensible.

<sup>10</sup> The meaning of *səraoša-* is explored in *Part Three: Serōsha*.

<sup>11</sup> The meanings of *spāncā* and *aspāncā* are discussed in *Part One: The Beneficial Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*.

<sup>12</sup> See *Part One: The Manthra of Choice, Ahuna Vairya* (Yatha Ahu Vairyo).

<sup>13</sup> In some later texts (including the YAv. *Fardardin Yasht*), a *saošyant-* is more in the nature of a messiah ~ someone of virgin birth through Zarathushtra's seed (miraculously preserved over the centuries in a lake until needed) ~ having great power who will come and solve all problems ~ material and spiritual ~ and make everything all right. In the Gathas we have a completely different view of what is a *saošyant-*. Each person can be, and needs to be, a *saošyant-*, a savior by translating good thinking and his knowledge of Wisdom's teachings, into actions which embody the true order of existence. This Gatha view of a *saošyant-* is also found in some YAv. texts, (discussed and detailed in *Part Two: A Question of Salvation*).

<sup>14</sup> See also (referring to the deities of Zarathushtra's society) "... Since they chose the worst thought, they then rushed into fury, with which they have afflicted the world and mankind." Y30:6, Insler 1975. Here, the *worst thought* is equated with fury, an emotion.

<sup>15</sup> Here are a few examples in later texts, of Zarathushtra's thought implied in the Gathas that all good people are worthy of respect:

In YHapt.39:2 (part of the *Yasna Haptanghaiti*, a text composed in the same language as the Gathas ~ Old Avestan ~ but much later than the Gathas) it says,

"... We worship the souls of truthful men and women [*ašāunam ... urunō ... narqmcā nāirinqmcā*] wherever they were born, whose better [*daēnā* 'envisionments'] do prevail, or will prevail, or have prevailed." YHapt.39:2, Humbach (1991) Vol. 1, p. 148.

Here Humbach translates *daēnā* as 'religious views'. But in the Gathas, *daēnā* is 'envisionment' ~ a way of looking at things. In the Gathas, there is good envisionment and wrongful envisionment (see *Part Three: Daena*). It was not till much later that *daēnā* (which subsequently evolved to *dīn*) became synonymous with religion, specifically with the later Zoroastrian religion.

The *Farvardin Yasht* (a YAv. text) states that we worship/celebrate the fravashis of the truth-possessing (*ašāunqm* which Darmesteter translates as 'of the holy'), of all countries. Specifically, in addition to the Fravashis of truthful men and women in the Arya countries, sections 143 - 144 state that we worship/celebrate the Fravashis of truthful men and women in other countries:

"Sairimyan" (which Darmesteter's ft. identifies as Europe and Western Asia),

"Saini" (which Darmesteter's ft. identifies as China, citing the Bundahish XV, 29),

"Dahi" (which Darmesteter's ft. identifies as perhaps Dahae, south of the Oxus), and

"all countries".

Darmesteter translation, SBE 23, p. 226 and ft. 6; and p. 227, and fts. 1, 2.

In a ft. Darmesteter quotes from the opinion of a Pahlavi commentator to this section, as follows:

"Gogoshasp (a commentator on the Avesta) says, ' There are holy men in all religions, as appears from the words *tuiryanam dahvyunam* [We worship the Fravashis of the holy men in the Turanian countries],' (Pah. Comm. Vend. III, end; and Vend. V, 38 [122]); ..." SBE 23, p. 226, note 5. All round parentheses and square brackets in this quotation are Darmesteter's. I have added nothing.

For the Avestan understanding of 'we worship' (*yazamaide*) as a celebration, see *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship*, and a ft. therein.