The Fire In All Things.

Visual imaging is a great way to communicate.   Our brains seem to be hardwired for imaging. The words we hear in a lecture are soon forgotten. But we remember the 'stories' we hear, or the images we see in pictures, movies, videos.

Zarathushtra's ideas are abstract. But his songs are rich with metaphors ~ visual imaging ~ which would have added interest and color for those who listened to, and sang, his songs. A metaphor is a poetic device in which a word is used in a way that is not literal, to evoke an idea or an impression. For example, *her eyes are starlight.*   The girl's eyes are not literally starlight. The poet uses 'starlight' as a metaphor to evoke the impression made by her eyes.

Zarathushtra uses the various forms of 'light' which were available in his time period ~ fire, glory, the sun ~ to evoke some of his most beautiful ideas.   In this chapter, I will give you just some highlights of how he uses 'fire' as a metaphor. A more detailed discussion of all his 'light' metaphors (including fire), is detailed in another chapter in *Part Two.*[1] All quotations from the Gathas are from the Insler 1975 translation, unless otherwise stated.

First, you might question: How do we know that Zarathushtra uses fire as a metaphor?   Well, he calls it "... Thy truth-strong fire..." Y43:4. Truth is not a quality of physical fire. So we know that 'fire' here is a metaphor. In the same way, a YAv. texts says,

> "Give me, O Fire ... an expanded mind, ... for soul and understanding, even an understanding continually growing ..." Yy62:4, Mills translation.[2]

Physical fire cannot increase understanding. So we know that in such later texts, fire is used as a metaphor.

The question is: For what?

Let us consider the evidence, step by step. Each step is relevant to our inquiry, although at first it may not seem to be.   So bear with me.

In Avestan, *vahišta-* is the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness (*vohu-*).   And central to Zarathushtra's system of thought is *aša-* which he calls *vahišta-* ~ the true (correct), wholly good order of existence ~ a very long definition, so 'truth' for short ~ including both factual truths, and also the truths of mind/heart/spirit, all that is good, right.[3]

The comprehension of truth is good thinking (*vohu- manah-*), which ultimately is Wisdom (*mazdā-*) ~ an enlightened existence. The word 'enlightened' itself is a metaphor, describing a mind which understands truth as being full of light. So it is not surprising that Zarathushtra uses 'light' metaphors for truth, its comprehension good thinking, and the Divine who personifies these qualities.   He speaks of,

"...truth [*aša-*] which attains glory..." Y51:4;

"... sunlike truth [*aša-*] ..." Y32:2,

"... the sunlike gain of good thinking [*vohu- manah-*] ..." Y53:4 ~ the comprehension of truth ~ a divine quality which he uses in this verse for a human girl, his daughter Pouruchista; and

"...Him who has the appearance of the sun..." Y43:16, referring to Wisdom who is completely enlightened ~ the sun being the strongest form of light in Zarathushtra's time period.

The Gatha idea that the true, wholly good, order of existence (*aša-   vahišta-*) is the nature of wisdom/Wisdom (*mazdā-*) is corroborated in the *Yasna Haptanghaiti*, (a text in Old Avestan, but not part of the Gathas), which says,

> 'O Lord, Wisdom, beautiful through truth [*ahurā   mazdā   ašā.srīrā*], ...' YHapt. 35:3, my translation; Av. words from Geldner 1P p. 129.

But these divine qualities ~ truth and its comprehension good thinking (among others) ~ are also part of man's nature ~ although sporadically, imperfectly, incompletely; an idea expressed throughout the Gathas. And it is echoed in many YAv. texts which speak of the 'wisdom within, and wisdom acquired by the ear'.[4]

A fundament of Zarathushtra's path is the search for truth and its comprehension "... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [*aša-*]. Truth, shall I see thee as I continue to acquire ... good thinking [*vohu-   manah-*]..." Y28:4 ~ 5.

And the ultimate reward for taking this path is the House of Good Thinking (Y32:15 - 16) ~ one of Zarathushtra's many terms for paradise. He uses 'house' as a metaphor for a state of being that houses good thinking ~ a state of being in which good thinking exists. A state of being that comprehends truth.   In his thought the paradise that mortals can attain is not a place. Paradise is an enlightened existence which ancient Zoroastrians sometimes called 'endless light(s)' in later texts (both YAv. and Pahlavi).

So it is interesting (is it not?) that in the Pahlavi *Bundahishn* 'endless light', is a name for the Divine.

> "... for the supreme is that which they call 'endless light, ..." E. W. West translation;[5]

corroborating the conclusion (in the Gathas) that Zarathushtra's paradise is attaining the true (correct) wholly good order of existence ~ an enlightened state of being that is Wisdom personified.

And one of the most frequently used 'light' metaphor for truth (*aša-*) ~ in the Gathas and throughout the later texts ~ is fire.

We have to wonder: Why?   Of all the 'light' words, why is fire often used as a metaphor for the true order of existence (*aša-*)?

Perhaps because in ancient times fire was the only form of light that man could make. With each good choice in thought, word and action ~ the "path(s) of truth" (Y51:13, Y33:5), and its comprehension "... the paths of good thinking..." Y34:12, Y51:16 ~ we evolve towards bringing about, creating, the fire of enlightenment ~ in ourselves and in our world.   We personify, incrementally and eventually completely, the true order of existence (*aša-*) ~ an enlightened existence that is w/Wisdom.

And in later texts fire is also used to express the immanence of the Divine in all things. Let us look at the evidence step by step. A Pahlavi *Fragment* corroborates that 'fire' is likened to wisdom (which is the nature of the Divine whose name is Wisdom Av. *mazdā-*).

> "2. This, too, that the nature of wisdom is just like fire ..." E. W. West translation.[6]

And in another Pahlavi text, the High Priest *Zad-sparam* states that this fire was diffused into all that exists,

> "...and Auharmazd [Av. *ahura- mazdā-*] produced the creatures bodily for the world; first, the sky; the second, water; the third, earth; the fourth, plants; the fifth, animals; the sixth, mankind. Fire was in all, diffused originally through the six substances ..." E. W. West translation.[7]

> "... the Propitious fire itself in heaven (garodman);[8] its manifestation is in the fire which is burning on the earth, and its propitiousness is this, that all the kinds are of its nature." E. W. West translation.[9]

We also see this idea of the fire in all things when we read together, YAv. Yy17:11, which calls fire by various names, and the Pahlavi texts *Bundahishn* (17:1) and *Zad-sparam* (11:1 - 8) which tell us what these named fires are in,[10]

> ~ The fire (named) 'High Benefit/Salvation' [*ātar- bərəzi.savah-*] which "shoots up before" the Lord Wisdom, is in the earth and mountains and the original creation.
> Now, why would fire be named 'salvation'? Well, In Zarathushtra's thought, salvation is attaining the qualities of the Divine. Salvation is not being saved from damnation; salvation is being saved from what is false, wrong, ignorant; salvation is enlightenment (I speculate that this fire is named 'Salvation' because it is our experiences in the material existence (on earth) that enable our evolution to enlightenment);

> ~ The fire (named) 'Goodness of Friendship' (*ātar- vohu.fryāna-*) in man and animals;

> ~ The fire (named) 'Most-Gladdening' (*ātar- urvāzišta-*) in plants,

> ~ The fire (named) 'Most-Welcoming' (*ātar- vāzišta-*) in clouds,

> ~ The fire (named) 'Most-Beneficial' (*ātar- spəṇišta-*) in the world itself, the fire Vahram (later, atash bahram) ~ vahram (Av. Verethraghna) meaning victorious (over evil).[11]

One metaphor ~ fire ~ to express the idea of the Divine in all that exists.

Imagine to yourself, each thing in nature ~ trees, waterfalls, lakes, grass, flowers, leaves, animals, birds, fish, man, the earth, the sky, everything in the world itself ~ each with glimmers of firelight within it, expressing the Divine in all that exists.

How beautiful is that ?!

And, with a turn of the kaleidoscope we see this same idea, but from a different perspective, in the ritual which governs how the fire for the highest temple (atash bahram) is made ~ by collecting fire from many sources ~ fire from lightning, the fires used by a potter, a glass blower and many other trades, a shepherd's fire, a warrior's fire, a ruler's fire, fire from a neighbor's hearth, fire from a burning corpse, and fire from burning trash.[12] Think about that for a moment. What does it tell us? It tells me that this ritual was invented to illustrate the idea that the sacred (symbolized by fire) exists in, and comes from, all aspects of existence. To me that is exquisitely beautiful. And so close to Zarathushtra's thought. This ritual also may have been intended to remind us that fire is stronger than, destroys, will win out over, even the greatest pollution (in those days), just as truth in

Zarathushtra's thought will eventually prevail over evil with certainty (*because* of the freedom to choose).[13]

In conclusion: Zarathushtra uses 'fire' as a metaphor for an idea that is at the core of his teachings ~ the true, (correct) wholly good order of existence (*aša-*) ~ an enlightened existence, the existence of wisdom/Wisdom (*mazdā-*), which we can create with our choices in thought, word and action; which we can help to bring about completely.

This metaphor was meaningful to the people of his time (and for centuries later), because of the central and beneficial role played by fire in their practical lives, and the equivalent role played by truth in their material and spiritual lives.

Fire helped to keep wild animals away ~ protecting against what harmed. In a parallel way, understanding and implementing (in thought, word and action) the true good order of existence helps to protect against ignorance, lies, cruelty, violence, greed, tyranny, and the other wrongdoings which cause suffering in mortal existence.

The hearth fire was the center of the home. It was necessary for survival in winter. Fire was necessary to cook food and make tools. In a parallel way, understanding and implementing the true order of existence nourishes minds and souls, helps the good in us, and in our social units, to survive and thrive, promotes material and spiritual well-being, and enables spiritual evolution and transformation.

In short, fire played a central, indispensible, and beneficial role in Zarathushtra's society, reflecting well the beneficial, central and indispensible role played by all that is good ~ the true order of existence, in material and spiritual life.

And lovliest of all was the use of fire as a metaphor to evoke the idea of the immanence of the Divine in all things. Fire can exist in many separate units. But when these separate units are put together, the result is one fire ~ the separation ceases to exist ~ suggesting the underlying unity of all existence ~ evolving to a state of being that is endless light.

* * * * * * *

---

[1] In *Part Two:* I discuss Zarathushtra's system of metaphors in a number of chapters. Fire is one of his 'light' metaphors, and is inter-related with other 'light' metaphors, which I discuss, giving additional details, and additional textual sources in *Part Two: Light, Glory, Fire.*

[2] SBE 31, p. 314.

[3] You well may question how anyone could think that existence has been ordered in a wholly good way in light of the realities of our experiences. In Zarathushtra's insightful mind, it has. That aspect of his teaching is explored in *Part One: A Friendly Universe;* and in *Part Two: Asha & The Checkmate Solution.*

[4] For a discussion of the popular phrase in YAv. texts ~ 'wisdom acquired by the ear, and the wisdom within', and its genesis in the Gathas, see *Part One: Meditation & Contemplation.*

[5] *Bundahishn*, Ch. 1, § 5, E. W. West translation, SBE 5, p. 4. By the time this Pahlavi text was written (around the mid to late 800s CE) Zoroastrians believed in cosmic dualism, and the "supreme" in this quotation refers to the all good Entity (by that time called Auharmazd, or Ohrmazd; Av. *ahura- mazdā-*).

Updated 2025

---

[6] According to E. W. West, this Fragment text is not a part of, but has been appended to, the Pahlavi text *Shayast La-Shayast.* But his translation numbers this Fragment text Ch. 20; the quotation is in §2, SBE 5, p. 394.

[7] *Selections of Zad-Sparam*, Chap. 1, §§ 20 - 21, SBE Vol. 5, p. 159.

[8] In some YAv. and Pahlavi texts, 'heaven' had become a place; in others it remained a state of being, as in the Gathas; see *Part Three: Heaven In Other Avestan Texts*; and *Heaven & Hell In Pahlavi Texts.*

[9] *Selections of Zad-Sparam*, Chap. 11, §§ 1 - 2, SBE 5, p. 184.

[10] The Fire names have been translated by me from Av. words shown in Geldner, except that I show them here in stem form. A more detailed discussion on these names is given in *Part Two: Light, Glory, Fire.*

[11] Discussed in detail in a ft. in *Part One: Buried Treasure In Ancient Stories.*

[12] J. J. Modi in his book, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees,* (2d ed. 1986 reprint), cites the *Ithoter Rivayet* as the source for this ritual of creating the atash bahram fire. Modi also notes that a somewhat parallel passage occurs in the *Vendidad,* (Modi, pp. 200 – 201). However the *Vendidad* passage does not pertain to or describe the creation of any ritual fire. It sets forth a system of rewards for bringing certain types of fire to a proper or lawful place, *Vendidad,* Ch. 8, §§ 81 ~ 96, SBE 4, pp. 112 - 116 (discussed in detail in *Part Two: Light, Glory, Fire*). Moreover, the *Vendidad* is a YAv. text, but its faulty grammar establishes that it was written long after YAv. times, when the religious establishment was no longer fluent in Avestan, so it would not have been composed during Avestan times (see *Part Five: The Vendidad, An Overview*).

[13] Detailed in *Part One: A Friendly Universe;* and in *Part Two: Asha & The Checkmate Solution.*

Updated 2025