

The Paradox of the Material and the Spiritual.

Our reality can be classified in many ways. One of these is to see it in terms of the physical and the abstract, or as Zarathushtra puts it, the "[existences ... of matter as well as of mind](#),¹ ..." Y28:2, Insler 1975.

Almost all the major religions teach that to achieve spiritual growth, we must renounce the material, withdraw from it. This teaching is implemented in a variety of ways, ranging from the simple, such as not eating things that we like (*I promise to give up candy for Lent*), to the more serious, such as fasting, embracing poverty and celibacy, renouncing the ties of family and friends, asceticism, becoming a hermit, and even 'mortifying the flesh' by wearing hair shirts, flogging the body, and inflicting other varieties of pain on oneself, as was the practice in some monastic Christian sects in the Middle Ages and for some time thereafter.

The underlying premise of such a belief is that what pertains to the material – especially material things that give us pleasure – is 'bad' and must be rejected, if we are to grow spiritually.

I find this approach to spirituality problematic. It brands a large part of our existence and our selves (the material) as 'bad'. It requires a type of self-hatred as a path to bring us closer to the Divine. But even more troubling, it creates the notion of a deity who is displeased when we enjoy ourselves, and is pleased by our deprivation, discomfort and pain. While it is true that learning self-control builds strength of character, self denial alone does not automatically bring about goodness. The mind has to exert itself to bring about a beneficial way of being.

Zarathushtra's understanding of the material and the spiritual is quite different from such conventional religious thinking. To him, the existence of matter is not intrinsically bad. It's how we use material things that creates 'good' or 'bad' results. But he goes a step further.

According to him, the material existence (among other things) was 'created',² by Wisdom's beneficial way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*). In Y44, he asks a series of rhetorical questions about who ordered and fashioned various aspects of the material existence, and the 'good' abstract existence. And he concludes that it is Wisdom who has generated these things through His beneficial way of being. "[...By these \(questions\), Wise One, I am helping to discern Thee to be the creator of everything by reason of Thy \[spənta- mainyu-\].](#)" Y44:7, Insler 1975. If the material existence was generated by Wisdom's beneficial way of being, it could not, by definition, be 'evil'. What is 'beneficial' cannot, by definition, spawn what is 'evil, harmful'.

According to Zarathushtra, the material world serves an indispensable purpose. It is through the medium of the material world that we attain spiritual growth, and eventually, completeness.³ An interesting paradox. Yet, a moment's reflection shows us the validity of his view. Good spiritual values cannot exist in a vacuum. To be worth anything, (at least in our reality), they have to be given substance through the material medium of thoughts, words and actions.

Just as a musician uses material instruments to express the music in his soul, just as an artist uses the material medium of paints, canvas, stone, wood, to express his artistic vision, in the same way the abstract qualities of the divine are brought to life, given substance, through the medium of our material world, using material things, making the true (correct), good order of existence real, giving it substance, with our good choices in thought, word and action.

Unfortunately, it has become fashionable today (among some Zoroastrians) to denigrate that simple Zarathushtrian maxim: good thoughts, good words and good actions. But I think this is a mistake. If we

stop and think about it, there is no aspect of our (wakeful) existence that is not a thought, or a word, or an action. Try to imagine some aspect of our (wakeful) existence that is not a thought, or a word, or an action. I was not able to do so.

Now we know that the true order of existence (*aša-*) is equated with 'goodness'.⁴ So each time we think a good thought, speak a good word, or do a good deed, in that small instance, we help to create the true order of existence. True, this creation might be only temporary (and perhaps not quite perfect), but each good thought, word and action spreads an influence, like the spreading circles of ripples when you drop a stone into a lake, helping, bit by bit, to bring about the desired end. So the ancient Zoroastrians who crafted this simple maxim captured in a nutshell the means by which we fulfill the purpose of life ~ through good thoughts, good words, good actions. As Shahin Bekhradnia says, in her moving essay on the values which Zoroastrians in Iran practiced,

"My parents taught me that essentially the main point of our religious teachings is that we leave the planet a better place through our own efforts and help increase the sum of human happiness by our presence in the world."⁵

As I understand Zarathushtra's thought, the purpose of life is,

(1) for each individual to evolve or grow, with each choice in thought, word, and action, into a way of being that no longer has harmful preferences, one that is completely, wholly, beneficial, good, in accord with the true order of existence; and

(2) helping to make things better ~ for other humans, other life forms, the environment, existence as a whole ~ by being 'existence healers' [*ahūm.biš*]; forwarding existence to truth, making it happen (*frašō.kərəiti*) without trying to control others (except to keep them from harming).

Now, I have expressed this purpose of life as though it was twofold ~ to advance ourselves, and to advance all of existence. But in fact, that is not so. For it is impossible to think a good thought, say a good word or do a good deed without benefiting not only ourselves, but also whatever is affected by such thoughts, words and actions ~ other people, other life forms, the environment. So the purpose is not twofold, it is one. When we benefit others, we benefit ourselves. When we advance ourselves spiritually to *haurvatāt*-, completeness, that is a step towards completing the whole of which we are component parts. There is an underlying unity in the diversity of existence.⁶

So this process of spiritual perfecting occurs in the arena of our material existence ~ each indispensable to the other. Goodness gives material things meaning and beauty. And (in our reality) material things enable the expression of goodness, giving it substance, making it real.

I like Zarathushtra's approach to the existences of matter and mind for so many reasons. Here are a few.

It relieves the material existence ~ so large a part of our reality ~ of the (illogical) stigma of being intrinsically 'bad'. His teachings generate a mind-set in which the material world is enjoyed, celebrated, used for good.

His teachings show us a perception of the Divine that does not require our self-hatred, deprivation, discomfort, pain, as a pre-requisite for spiritual growth and Divine approval. On the contrary. His perception of the Divine is One who is so generous, that in providing a material matrix for spiritual advancement, He has crafted this material arena in ways that often give us joy and pleasure, while we use it to benefit existence. Despite the fact that grief and suffering have a (beneficial) part to play,⁷ according to Zarathushtra, the path to the Divine is essentially a joyful one.⁸

In the final analysis, in Zarathushtra's understanding of (our present) reality, the material and the spiritual are parts of one harmonious whole, each with its role to play in bringing about the desired end. The spiritual is advanced through the material. The material is advanced through the spiritual. A paradox that enables the harmony of a beneficent, happy, existence in our (present) reality.

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¹ In the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses *manah*- 'mind', 'thinking', 'thought', to include more than just the intellect and its functions; it also includes emotions, creativity, insight, et cetera, detailed in *Part One: Good Thinking, Vohu Manah*.

² Zarathushtra has an unusual notion of 'creation' and why the material creation was necessary in the first place, which is discussed, with evidence, in *Part Two: The Puzzle of Creation*.

³ See in *Part One: Completeness, and Non-Deathness, Haurvatat, Ameretat*;

And in *Part Two, Asha and the Checkmate Solution; A Question of Reward & the Path; and The Puzzle of the Most-Good, Vahishta..*

⁴ See *Part One: Truth, Asha*.

⁵ Shahin Bekhradnia, *Iranian Zoroastrianism*, on www.zoroastrian.org.uk/vohuman.

⁶ See *Part Two: A Question of Immanence*.

⁷ See *Part One: A Friendly Universe*, and *Part Two: Asha & the Checkmate Solution*.

⁸ See *Part One: Joy, Happiness, Prosperity*.