

ZARATHUSHTRA SPITAMA

aka **Zoroaster**

The Founder of Zarathushtrianism

aka **Zoroastrianism**

aka **Zarathushti Din**

When: around 3,500 years ago
Where: somewhere around the Aral Sea



What was it like then and there?

None of the comforts which we take for granted now. No electricity. No mechanical transport. No communication beyond their settlements. No books or television to pass the time. Long, dark nights. Very cold winters. Weather permitting and the day's chores done, sitting, talking around campfires. After the sun, the fire being most important for keeping alive. Always alert to the many natural calamities and the arrival of robbers from neighbouring tribes.

Asking the same questions we still ask today:

- ⇒ Why are we here?
- ⇒ Why is life not just full of joy?
- ⇒ Why is there so much pain and suffering?
- ⇒ Why are there earthquakes, storms, drought and other calamities which make life so difficult?
- ⇒ What happens when we die?



The answers they got from their elders and priests seemed far from comforting.

They worshipped the Sun god, the dispeller of darkness, and the moon and stars which illumined the nights. They also paid homage to the other life-sustaining elements: fire, water, sky, earth, plants and useful animals. This was good.

But the priests succumbed to greed and instilled in people the fear of invisible “gods” and “goddesses” who they said controlled the elements. The corrupt priests started demanding cattle from the people to offer as sacrifice to keep these “gods” and “goddesses” (but really themselves) well fed and happy. Disobedience, they sternly declared, was what made the “gods” angry and caused calamities and increasing violence between the tribes. Thus the priests became richer at the expense of the poor.

When things got really bad and no help was forthcoming, the poor came to long for a saviour.

One day, in response to their cry for help, a strange light glowed around the home of the Spitama family where Pourushaspa and Dughdova were expecting their third child. ★

The overjoyed people saw this marvel as an answer to their prayers. But the priests insisted that this was an ill omen. Another strange phenomenon was reported from the Spitama homestead - this child was born laughing! This, they said, was definitely a sign of worsening times ahead. Their solution was to order more sacrifices; they even tried to kill the infant. But all their schemes failed.

★ *Zarathushtra had two elder brothers: Ratushtar and Rangushtar and later two younger brothers: Nodariga and Nivedis.*



Zarathushtra grew up watching his people suffer. He knew he was powerless to remove the cause of their woes, but he resolved to find a way for them to understand and deal with their problems.

At the age of twenty, he left home and went into the wilderness on his camel in search of Truth.

When we are troubled, we too can take a break from our daily routine and find sanctuary in a quiet space. Such retreats clear the mind and help us to receive the answers we are looking for.

Who or what were these whimsical “*gods*” and “*goddesses*” which the priests kept prating about, insisting that they needed to be appeased? Were they for real?

If indeed they had created the world and were almighty, how come the world was not perfect? And if they punished disobedient human beings, as the priests said they would, why were innocent people, children and animals made to suffer, too?

One day Zarathushtra, after a decade or so of wandering in the wilderness, stood praying on the shores of the river Daitya (*the Oxus*). He suddenly saw before him a luminous being in human form, but this man was nine times taller than any man on Earth!

The being introduced itself as Vohu Manah, the Good Mind. In response to Zarathushtra’s earnest prayers, Vohu Manah had come to escort him to meet the Supreme Intelligence, the Creator of the Universe - Mazda Ahura.

Zarathushtra, at immeasurable speed, was transported to Anaghra Raocha – the realm of Endless Light. He was blinded by a light which was brighter than all the suns in the universe.



Zarathushtra wondered how he would describe to the people what he could not see. Wordlessly, Mazda gave him the answer he sought:

“Tell them that My body is Light, My mind is Wisdom, and My spirit is Truth. Wheresoever there is light, wisdom and truth, there am I.”

This confused Zarathushtra. What about the overwhelming darkness, ignorance and lies that caused so much grief in the world? This, too, he wanted to know.

As in an immediate response, two normally invisible spirits revealed themselves to him. One clearly creative and the other entirely destructive. He saw these two in action. The Creative Spirit began the process of evolution from an eruption of Light. From this pure energy, which emerged from Zravanahe Akaranahe, or Boundless Time, streamed a myriad material forms. These were subject to the immediate attacks of the destructive spirit.

All living things, from the tiniest to the largest, marched through Zravanahe Daregho Khadhatahe, a long duration of time sustained by nature’s laws. Appearing and disappearing. This conflict between life and death – or good and evil – was not eternal but continued, seemingly without end, until the destructive spirit finally wore itself out.

Excited by this revelation of the awesome cosmic battle, Zarathushtra, now back on Earth, recorded it in his sacred hymns, the Gathas.

“Of course! Yes! There are two fundamental spirits. Two! From the One Infinite Creative Spirit of Ahura Mazda – Spenta Mainyu – life comes into being. The other, (Angra Mainyu or Ahriman) shrouded in darkness, is a finite dark spirit which, because of its destructive nature, fiercely destroys at random everything it encounters, achieving as a result its own undoing.”

So this was Mazda’s plan! This was why the world had been created. This explained why it was plagued with ignorance, lies, hatred, greed, intolerance and all manner of suffering.



If everyone were to be made aware of this Truth, would they join forces with Mazda Ahura, the Wise Creator, and help to hasten the end of the conflict? Or would people continue to take the easy option of praying for divine intervention to resolve their problems and be disappointed if nothing came of it?

Would people accept - or even understand - the intangible spiritual reward of eternal bliss that awaited those who participated in the completion of this cosmic plan? How many, he wondered, would work towards an abstract goal of Paradise with no promise of worldly gain.

Zarathushtra vowed to make it his mission to try.

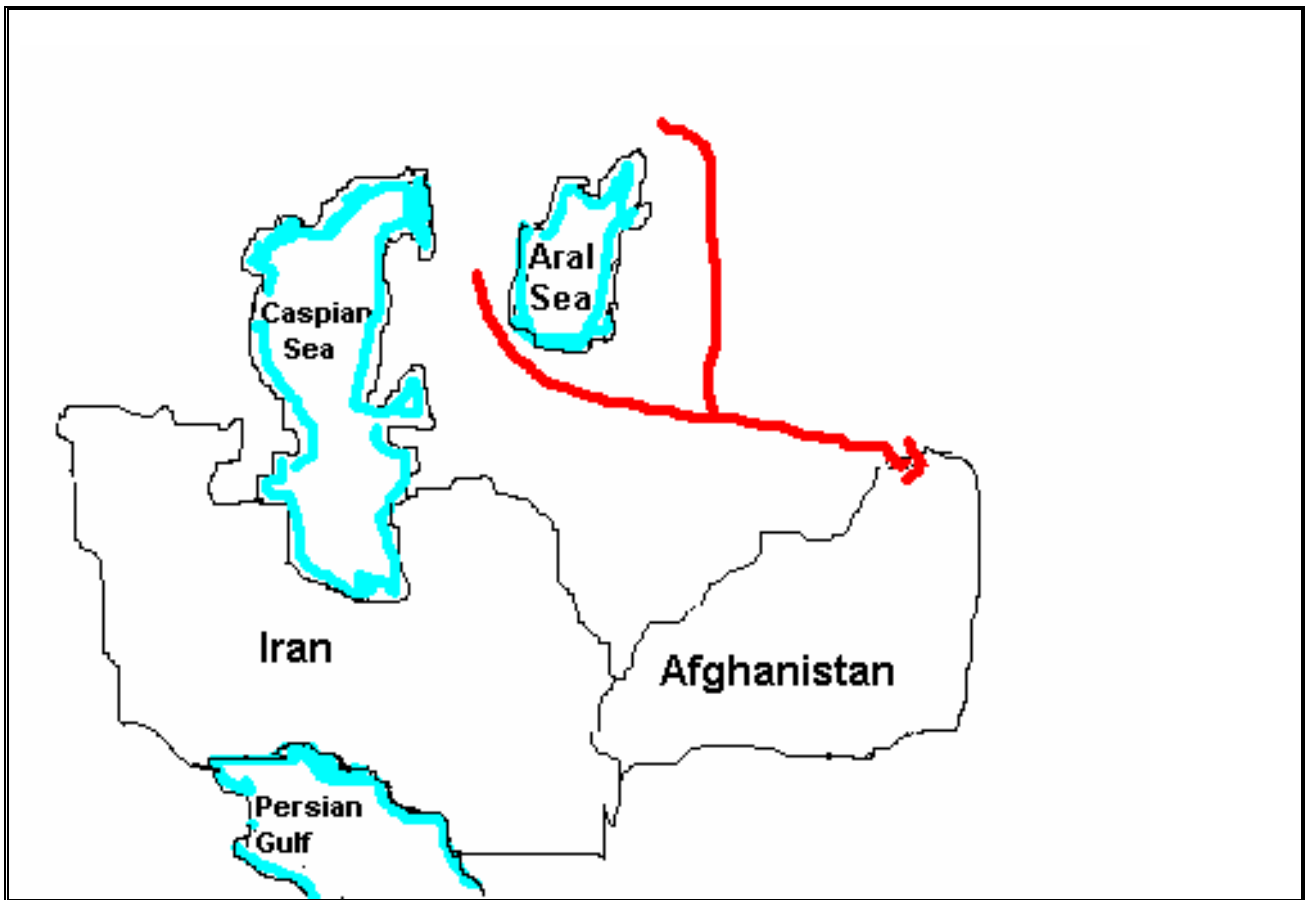
He returned home and invited people to listen to and reflect on what he had to say. Alas, except for his cousin Maidhyoimangha, no one was prepared to take on the task.

Disappointed but not disheartened, Zarathushtra rode back into the wilderness to resume his meditation.

Even when we have a problem that troubles us, we should not give up. Instead, like Zarathushtra, we must use our own Vohu Manah (the Good Mind) to find a solution to the problem, rather than take the easy option of lying, cheating and bullying others as did the priests who opposed Zarathushtra, or being like those who were afraid of change or too lazy to think for themselves.



Then, one day in his fortieth year, Zarathushtra received guidance from Mazda to proceed to the court of King Vishtaspa in a distant land.



King Vishtaspa and Queen Hutaosa listened attentively to what Zarathushtra had to say, but like the corrupt priests in his own land, the wicked wizards, sorcerers and advisors to the King sought to set a trap for Zarathushtra.

They lied to the King that they had proof of the visitor's evil intentions.

They fed the King's favourite horse some poisonous herbs and blamed its suffering on Zarathushtra's presence in the palace. The ill-advised King had Zarathushtra thrown into the dungeon.

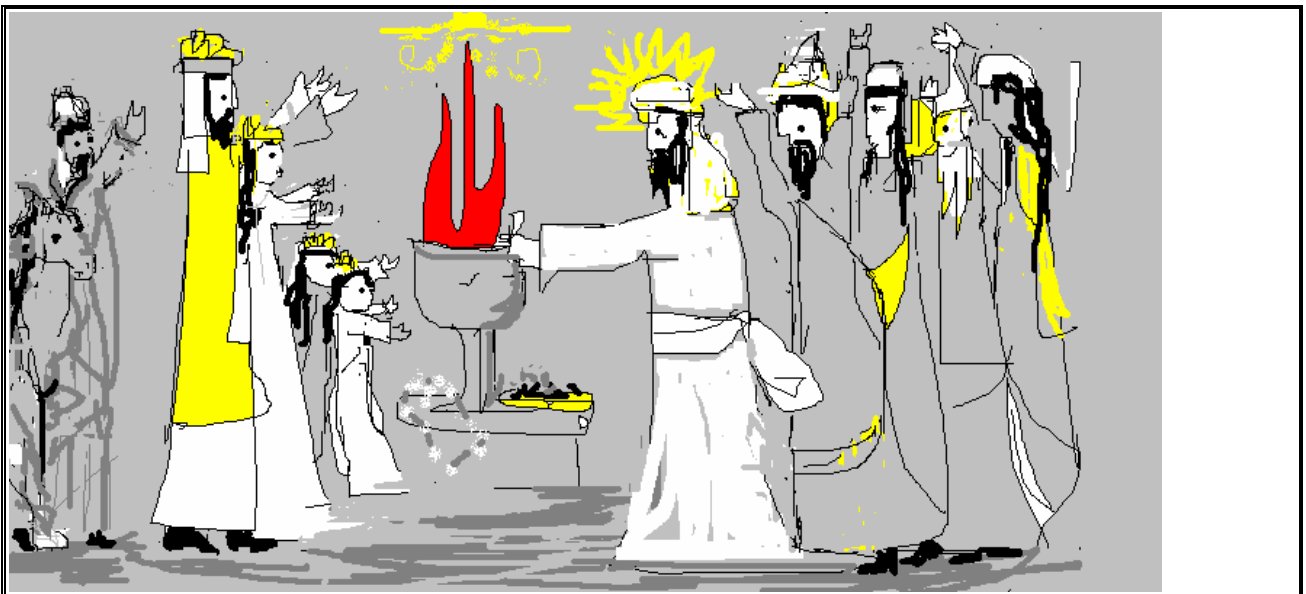
The best medicine men of the land were unable to revive the poor animal.



The imprisoned Zarathushtra prayed, as always, to Ahura Mazda for guidance. In a dream, he was told to send word to the King through his guard that he would cure the horse. His conditions were that he should be freed and that the King, his family and all his subjects should thenceforth worship only Mazda Ahura, the Wise Creator who did not require animal sacrifice but expected people to take care of the natural world.

Today, as a result of our having neglecting this ancient counsel, there is a growing concern for the alarming climatic changes that are occurring all over the world. These threaten the very survival of life on Earth.

The King agreed to Zarathushtra's terms. With full faith in Ahura Mazda, Zarathushtra cured the horse with the recitation of a prayer. True to his promise, the King freed Zarathushtra and the royals became the first Mazdayasni Zarathushtis.



Our Scriptures tell us that, in spite of hidden enemies in the Kingdom, Zarathushtra lived a long life. We also learn that when he was seventy-seven years and forty days old, he was murdered while deep in meditation. His wife's name is recorded as Hvovi and his three daughters were called Freni, Thrity, and Pouruchista.

According to the Zarathushtrian calendar, the birthday of our Prophet Zarathushtra is currently celebrated on Khordad roz Fravardin mah and his death anniversary is observed on Khorshed roz Dae mah.



THE ZARATHUSHTRIAN CALENDAR

Each day of the Zarathushtrian calendar of thirty days (*roz*) and twelve months (*mah*) are dedicated to a particular creation of Mazda and to spiritual guardians - a unique way to remember that we are to be eco-friendly and live a life of good conduct.

The calendar year is currently running at 1377 (started at the coronation of the last Zoroastrian King Yazdegird III).

This calendar also gives Zarathushtrians the opportunity to celebrate two birthdays! The globally accepted one and a community one.

Aside from getting two gifts on two birthdays a year, when celebrating the birthday according to the community calendar, it is traditional for little Zarathushti children to enjoy being bathed first thing in the morning with a sprinkling of milk and rose petals by mum to make them feel really special. But after the Navjote, the child is deemed to be grown up enough to earn his/her “specialness”!

THE NAVJOTE

At the age of 7, 9, or thereabouts, our community’s boys and girls are initiated into the Zarathushtrian faith.

During the Navjote ceremony, held in the presence of a fire which burns brightly in the traditional urn, and before a gathering of relatives and friends, the officiating priest helps the child to put on the *sudreh* and tie the *kushti* for the first time. The child then pledges to work for the rest of his/her life for Ahura Mazda using the tools of *humata*, *hukhta*, and *huvarashta* (righteous thoughts, good words and right actions) to defeat *dushmata*, *duzukhta*, and *duzvarashta* (evil thoughts, bad words and wrong deeds).

Blessings, hugs, and kisses (and many gifts!) are showered upon the brand new Mazdayasni Zarathushti and everybody present enjoys the party which is hosted by the proud family.

Thereafter, the *kushti* ritual should be performed at least twice each day - first thing after a bath in the morning and just before bedtime. This acts as a reminder to do one’s duty to help Mazda ‘help those in need’ (*drigubyo dadat vastarem*). This duty of ‘helping those in need’ includes nurturing Mazda’s creations which, as environmentalists the world over will confirm, are in dire need of our help today.



THE KUSHTI BASTAN PRAYERS

Kem na Mazda

Who other than You, Ahura Mazda, can I turn to when I am threatened with harm and injustice? Who, other than You, through Your Wisdom and the fire which enlightens me of the Truth, will protect me and those worthy of your protection in my home? With the blessing of Your Divine Love and the ever watchfulness of Your eternal spirit within me, I shall strive to recognize and reject evil which can enter only through an unguarded mind. Therefore, I seek Your help to remind me to be vigilant at all times.

Ahura Mazda Khodae

There are unseen enemies all around me – wicked persons and wicked thoughts. These confront me in my daily life. I must first recognize them, then keep my distance from wrong-minded persons and reject those thoughts which I know are not good for me. If I sometimes fail, I repent of the harm I have done to myself and other good persons and hereby promise to strive harder to remain righteous for the sake of Righteousness. This will help me progress in this world so that I may return to You in high spirits when I die, knowing I did my best to serve You as every committed Mazdayasno Zarathushti should.

During the recitation of this prayer we make two loops with a bridge between them. One loop symbolizes the spiritual realm and the other the material world. These are connected by a bridge, which means that we cross over from the spiritual realm to the material world when we are born and then return to Mazda when we die - hopefully with a lot of good work done on Earth! Then, before tying the kushti we touch our forehead with the ‘bridge’ on the words kshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao (glory unto Ahura Mazda) after which, on the words taroidite angrahe mainyeush we deliberately banish evil, just as we do when we whip the kushti at the beginning of this prayer - starting with the words Ahriman avadashan dur avaz dashtar!



Regarding the four knots made while tying the *kushti*, I quote below from Framroz Rustomjee's book 'Daily Prayers of the Zoroastrians'.

“When the first knot is tied, the devotee should remember that the firmament above and the earth below, though they seem separate to the eyes of man, are yet bounded together as one whole. The second knot should remind him that Holy Zarathushtra was the Prophet of Ahura Mazda. The third knot should remind him that what is revealed in our religion is pure and sublime and that we have to accept the teachings faithfully. The fourth knot should remind the devotee that he is bound to serve humanity and to be a co-sharer in the joys and sorrows of his fellow man.”

Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo)

This is a prayer for 'action'. Ahura Mazda has provided all of us with a good mind and a sound body and infused in us Ahuric energy with which to perform such actions as will hasten the victory of good over evil. How can we best perform this duty? The recital of the Ahunavar prayer gives us the necessary vigor to seek out and help whosoever and whatever good cause needs helpers.

Ashem Vohu

This is a prayer for attaining 'peace and happiness'. Everyone wants to be happy. The Ashem Vohu is not recited for attaining the sort of temporary happiness which comes from winning some prize or other, getting gifts, passing exams etc. but the kind of everlasting happiness that is the natural result of being truthful for the sake of Truth, being at peace with others and in harmony with our environment.

Jasa me avanghe Mazda

This is a solemn declaration of the initiate's formal entry into the Mazda-worshipping Faith. He/she seeks the help of Ahura Mazda to remain steadfast to the teachings of the Mazdayasni faith as explained by the Prophet Zarathushtra. The devotee also pledges obedience to the fundamental rule of practicing good thoughts, good words and good deeds and promises to cherish the religious beliefs and customs of the Faith as being the best for him/her.



It is important that the initiate should believe the commitment that is being made because he/she cannot promise to do or affirm anything without understanding what is being said.

These prayers are chanted in ancient Avestan and the later Pahlavi languages and have a vibratory power of their own when recited aloud. This is why, while knowing what we pray through translation is wise, reciting these *māthras*, or holy words, in any other tongue cannot be held to be effective. This applies to the source languages used during religious services by other faiths as well.

NATIONAL INTEGRATION:

With fewer than 130,000 Zarathushtrians in the world today, it is up to us to keep this ancient yet timeless religion vibrantly alive. To this end, it is important to make our youngsters proud of their illustrious heritage and aware of our history of living in harmony with people of other faiths throughout the ages.

Any history book will tell you that the title of ‘Great’ was earned by the Persian kings of yore because of their firm belief that they were appointed to be just rulers by none other than Ahura Mazda. It could be that the present day Charter of Human Rights has its genesis in glorious age of the great Achaemenian kings, which was around 2,500 years ago.

Nearer to our own time, the Quissa-i-Sanjan tells us of those Zarathushtrians who fled from oppression in Iran and took refuge in Western India in 936 CE.

After over a thousand years of successful national integration in India, many Zarathushtrians have spread further afield, proving that it is not merely possible but also wise to keep one’s religious practices private, while being a loyal and productive citizen anywhere in the world.



THE FIRST NAVJOTE

Currently, my daughter Ava and I are working on an illustrated booklet, “The First Navjote” which we hope will encourage readers to find out more about the Prophet Zarathushtra Spitama and his teachings.

We have tried through a simple tale to convey the message that each individual’s contribution is needed to bring about the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil - which is the very purpose of creation as envisioned by the Prophet.

Ava wrote and illustrated the children’s book, “Zoroastrianism, the Story of our Religion”, which was published by Zoroastrian Studies in 1988. She now lives, teaches and conducts creative family workshops in London.

When she mentioned to me that local councils were looking for simply-worded books for distribution in multi-faith schools and organizations, we got to work on ‘The First Navjote’. It is our hope that the booklet will be published in the UK and share the shelves with books about other religions of the world.

I am indebted to Khojeste Mistree for my initial training at Zoroastrian Studies, Bombay. It was he who encouraged me to study and explore the many books written by respected scholars of the past and introduced me to some of the leading professors and priests (*dasturs*) of our time.

Prior to my study of the unique theology presented in the Gathic and Pahlavi texts, I practiced the Faith and followed the traditions piously enough - but without understanding. Now I am committed to spreading the message of Zarathushtra, as I understand it, whenever and wherever I am invited to do so.

To my amazement, it contains not just a treatise for the people of the Prophet’s time and habitat, but provides a foundation of ideas for all religious thinkers to build on. Indeed, Professor Mary Boyce and others have acknowledged Zoroastrianism as “*having a shadowy but powerful presence in the later Judaeo-Christian world*”.

While Zarathushtra’s unique concept of One God and an adversary - vis-à-vis Good and Evil - is not as clearly defined in the Abrahamic scriptures as it is in the Gathic texts. The choice between the Two is the innate law of human conduct and each choice must have its consequences.



I also express my indebtedness to my husband, Meher, for his support in more ways than one - not the least of which has been in making this long journey from Calcutta to Sydney seem shorter and easier.

In the pages that follow the story of “The First Navjote”, I have set down very simplified explanations of the five prayers which are recited while performing the *kushti* ritual. The title of each is appropriately embedded in the narrative so that the reader may identify their relevance to a given circumstance.



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