

## The Nature of Prayer

### Prayer : A Vehicle of Communication

The Avestan term for the holy word is *spenta māthra*, and a string of *māthras* forms a series of formulated utterances known as *Yasna* (prayer).

Prayer enables man to gain access to a subtler dimension of reality, a dimension that takes man beyond the sensate, tangible state. In other words prayer is a medium or vehicle of communication between the seen and unseen worlds. Through prayer man is able to recognize the inexplicable harmony of the three worlds — the physical, psychological and spiritual. "...And let us send forth in our liturgies between the heaven and earth, the Holy good prayer of the righteous man for blessings." (Y.61.1).

### Formulated Utterances: Their Need

In Zoroastrianism it is through the repeated utterance of the holy words that man is fortified to fight evil. "He wishes O Wise Lord, to recite hymns of praise for us and for the truth (*asha*), if he might receive for himself *hud-emem vakhedrahya* (the sweetness of speech)". (Y.29.8).

Clearly then, it is through the "sweetness of speech" that man is able to generate a gnosis of truth, for within the good word lies the potential good deed. Prayer is a medium through which man consciously strives to affirm the existence and the inherent nature of God through the link that is generated by the prayer in the three worlds. The holy word is often likened to the truth itself as truth is the word of God which affirms itself to itself. In the *Rashn Yasht*, Zarathushtra is said to have asked Ahura Mazda "...What of the Holy Word is created true?.....Ahura Mazda answered: '....the most glorious Holy Word (itself), this is what in the Holy Word is created true, that which is created progress making, that which is fit to discern, that which is healthful, wise and happy, that which is more powerful to destroy than all other creatures.'" (Yt.12.1 - 2).



A Median officer (c 6th century B.C.)

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Prayer, in other words, gives man an inner happiness coupled with strength and power in order to thwart the forces of deceit in the period of heightened conflict. Prayer equips man ".....for the encounter with, and for the displacement of Angra Mainyu with his creatures which are likewise evil as he is, for he is filled with death." (Y.61.2).

In the *Sraosh Yasht Hādokht* it is stated, ".....The faithful one who pronounces most words of blessing is the most victorious in victory; the Holy Word (*Spenta Māthra*) takes best, the unseen *druj* away...." (Yt.11.3). This implies that prayer uttered with the right consciousness and motivation generates a power (*amaī*) that helps man to overwhelm the Lie.

In Zoroastrianism, God is seen to be a friend of man, ".....Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend." (Y.46.2). A man who accepts God's friendship has to communicate with this cosmic force in order that he is able to express his anxieties, expectations and desires, as well as proffer thanks to the Lord of Wisdom who bestows goodness upon all His creations.

### The Holy Word Incarnate : Sraosh

In Zoroastrianism the *Yazata* Sraosh is recognized to be the Lord of Prayer. One of his characteristic epithets is *tanu.māthra*, he whose body is the sacred word. "May Glory be to Sraosh the blessed, the mighty, the incarnate word of reason, whose body is the *māthra*, him of the daring spear, devoted to the Lord, for (his) sacrificial worship, homage, propitiation, and praise." (Y.57.1).

It is through prayer that man is given the strength and discipline to battle against the forces of evil. Both these qualities are soldierly ones and hence the Lord of Prayer bears a likeness to the warrior *Yazata* Mithra, the Lord of Contract.

In the Avesta, Sraosh is the only *Yazata* who has two hymns dedicated in his honour and in the *Gāthās* he is recognized to be the "greatest of all" (*Av.vispē.mazishtem* Y.33.5). He also plays a role in the after-life doctrine, for it is Sraosh who acts as one of the assessors at the "Bridge of the Separator". ".....Sraosh the righteous, gives the soul, for three days and nights, the place of the spirit of air in the world, and protection, and because of the protectiveness of Sraosh.....and likewise by Sraosh's taking the account, .....for that purpose are the manifest reasons for performing and ordering the ceremony of Sraosh for three days and nights." (*Dd.28.5-6*).

Sraosh, the Lord of Prayer, is invoked frequently in order that he may bestow protection upon the person who invokes him. Hence the *Bāj* of Sraosh is one of the most commonly used formulae in Zoroastrian rituals. Within Sraosh lies the gracious word that protects him who understands the form of that word, from which may be derived an explanation or revelation that incarnates in the *Spenta Māthra*. "We revere Sraosh.....of the gracious words, of the warning and guarding words, who intones our hymns on every side, who possesses understanding, and of every brilliant form which abounds in many an explanation and revelation of the word, who has the first place in the *Māthra*." (Y.57.19-20).

### Continuity : A Link with the Past

The *Gāthās* constitute the bedrock of Zoroastrian prayers, for it is in the prophet's own words that one finds the spirit of the religion. The most powerful prayers therefore are the *Gāthās*, insulated by later compilations which are recited before and after these divine hymns. ".....And we worship all the words of Zarathushtra, and all the deeds well done (for him), both those that have been done, and those which are yet to be done." (Y.57.4).

When one recites the *Gāthās*, it is in effect reliving and trying to experience the prophet's

revelation on an existential level. It is within the language of revelation that the strength, authenticity and continuity of the religion are founded. If one changes the language of revelation it follows that the spirit of revelation, its esoteric quality, changes with it. The strength of the Avesta lies in the fact that the prayers of the tradition have been repeated innumerable times by the followers of the faith. When this happens there is an unbroken transmission of the power of the word from which a continuity develops. When the continuity is altered, the spirit behind that continuity also undergoes a change. Hence it is imperative to continue reciting one's prayers in the root language and not merely read them in translated form. In translation, not only is there a loss of meaning but much more important, there is a loss in the spirit that links the present with the past. Within the sacred words lie not only the potential future deeds but also embodied within them are the deeds of the past threaded together in the present, by a person who chooses to re-activate this continuity. This continuity links man to his primordial source, and at the same time enables man to experience an inexplicable harmony within the moment, a "communion with God".

It should be borne in mind that prayer is not just an intellectual dialogue with God but a devotional communion which necessitates the need for a continuity of the spirit that the prayer embodies. However, there is an intellectual dimension which also exists within the sacred word. This dimension may be realized when a Zoroastrian comprehends the meaning of what he is praying. ".....we worship unto the knowledge of the Holy Word." (*Sirozah* 2.29). The knowledge of what one prays is to be found in the translation of that prayer. However, in the translation there will undoubtedly be some loss of originality and content; nevertheless it does give a person an intellectual insight into the meaning of the prayer. If one chooses to pray in a commonly understood language, then the continuity and spirit of the prayer is undoubtedly going to suffer. On the

other hand, the recitation in the language of compilation, complemented with an intellectual appreciation of the prayer is perhaps striking the right balance.

Above all, a Zoroastrian should realize that prayer must always be an existential communion with God which is all the more heightened when man consciously recognizes the strength of the holy Word. "And we worship the praises of the prayer which were the production of the ancient world, those which are (now) recollected and put in use, those which are now learned and taught, those which are being held (in mind, and so) repeated, those remembered and recited, and those worshipped, and thus the ones which further the world through grace in its advance. And we worship the parts of the praises of the *Yasna*, and their recitation as it is heard, even their memorized recital and their chanting and their offering as complete." (*Y.55.6*).

### Prayer : The Power of Healing

Since ancient times Zoroastrian prayers have been used for the purposes of healing. It is believed that through the power of prayer, man is able to combat evil and restore harmony and balance in the world. One of the central themes of esoteric Zoroastrianism is the use of prayer to restore a state of balance and harmony, for it is believed that disorder, disease and pain are the direct results of the affliction of evil. "The Creator Ohrmazd has given injunction unto Zarathushtra that the *Yathā Ahū Vairyō* is the smiter of the demons and the protector of the body." (*Per. Riv.* p 10).

In Zoroastrianism, healing is not just the curing of illness but it is the act of restoring order and harmony in the world. In the *Ardibehesht Yasht* (*Yt.3.6*), five types of healers are mentioned:

1. The healer who heals through the truth. (*Av.ashō-baēshazō* - the faith healer).
2. The healer who heals through the knowledge of the doctrine. (*Av.dārō-baēshazō* - the preacher).

3. The healer who heals with a knife. (*Av.karetō-baēshazō* – the surgeon).
4. The healer who heals through using plants and herbs. (*Av.urvarō-baēshazō* – the herbalist).
5. The healer who heals through the holy word. (*Av.māthrō-baēshazō* – the one who prays).

It is the fifth type of healer who is believed to be the most effective for in the same verse it is stated, ".....amongst all remedies this one is the healing, one that deals with the Holy Word (*Av.spenta māthra*); this one is that which will best drive away sickness from the body of the faithful; for this one is the best healing of all cures." (*Yt.3.6*).

Within the *māthrō-baēshazō* there are two methods of healing – the first done through the performance of high inner rituals in Zoroastrian fire temples, and the second, done through the use of *nīrang*s. A *nīrang* is an incantation of a formula of prayers which, when recited within a proper prescribed framework of other prayers, is believed to generate a power and an efficacy necessary for healing. A *nīrang* is juxtaposed between two portions of prayers which are collectively referred to as the *bāj* (*Ph.wāj*). The *bāj* itself is framed in two sections which are technically known as "taking the *bāj*" (*Ph.wāj grīftan*, *Guj.bāj levānī*) and "leaving the *bāj*" (*Ph.wāj be guftan*, *Guj.bāj mukvanī*).<sup>1</sup>

A healer therefore must be in a state of high physical and ritual purity. According to the *Shāyest-nē-shāyest*, a healer is "....a righteous man, O Spitama Zarathushtra, who is a purifier, who should be a speaker that speaks truly, and an enquirer of the sacred texts.....and one who understands the purification from the religion of the Mazda worshippers, that is he understands its religious formulae, the *nīrang*s." (*Shrsh.12.23*).

1. See Mary Boyce and Firoze Kotwal in "Zoroastrian *bāj* and *nīrang*", BSOAS Vol.34 Part 1, 1971, p 58.

## The Development of Prayers

Over the centuries, the prayers in Zoroastrianism have been compiled in two languages, Avestan and Pahlavi. The earliest prayers are the hymns of the prophet – the *Gāthās* which, soon after the prophet's death it is believed, were insulated by the corpus of later compilations known as the *Yasna*.

The authorship and dating of all the post *Gāthic* prayers and literature (*Yasnas*, *Yashts*, *Nyāishes*, *Vendidād* and the *Khordeh Avesta*, as well as the later Pahlavi compilations) are unknown. They nevertheless incorporate within themselves a homogeneous link of esoteric truths, which in no way contradict the spirit of the *Gāthās*. The later prayers were undoubtedly compiled by spiritually evolved sages who must have been in a heightened state of awareness and knowledge to maintain the uniformity and the spiritual continuity of the tradition.

## The Five Categories of Prayers

1. Wisdom poetry eg. the prophet's hymns, the *Gāthās*.
2. Meditative formulae eg. the *Ahunavar*, *Ashem Vohū*, *Yēnghe Hātūm* and *Airyema Ishyō*.
3. Prayers of praise, propitiation and thanksgiving eg. the *Yasna*, *Yashts* and *Nyāishes*.
4. Prayers for boons and intercession eg. the *Yashts*, *Dōa Tan-Dōrōsfī* and *Patēt Pashēmāni*.
5. Prayers of ritual instructions eg. the *Vendidād*.

## The Mechanics of Prayer

Zoroastrian prayers may either be recited aloud (*Ph.gushada*) or silently (*Ph.bishta*). Tradition has it that the efficacy of the prayer is greater when one recites it at an audible level so that the harmonious sound of the prayer is able to generate a ritual power (*amaš*) as well as a quality that is realized and may be experienced differently by each individual. Hence for all our rituals, the prayers are recited aloud as

it is believed that the recitation of a string of holy words reproduces a *māthric* quality which in turn is believed to drive away the demons. When prayers are audibly recited the innate power of the word becomes dynamic, resulting in an increase in the awareness of the individual. This in turn produces a heightened spiritual state based upon the collage of holy words which then indefinitely resonate in the universe. Audible sounds also tend to change the breathing pattern of the individual activating, it is believed the spiritual centres within the body, commonly known as the *chakras*.

When a prayer is recited silently, the effect is of a different nature. Here, the prayer lends itself to a private communion of a meditative sort between man and his Creator. This in turn enables man to focus upon the mirrored reality of the workings of God within himself, resulting in a momentary insight of another dimension. At certain points in a ritual, the priest often recites a prayer in an intoned voice (*bishta*). This is done in order to denote a change in the language and metre when a Pahlavi portion is juxtaposed between two Avestan sections. For example, in the *Ātash Nyāish* prayer after the Avestan words "...yō ahmāi, aēsmem baraiti hikūsh, raochas - pairishtā ashahē bereja yaozdātā", one silently intones a Pahlavi verse "Ohrmazd Khodāe awazūnt-i-merdum.....nēktī rasānād, ēdun bād!", followed by the *Ahuna*var prayer which is recited aloud as it is in the Avestan language.

### The Attitudinal Responses to Prayer

There are seven basic attitudinal responses towards the recitation of prayer resulting in a variety of experiences derived thereof.

#### Vegetable Man

The *doer* is a person who prays mechanically through habit and fails to experience essentially the quality of the prayer.

The *thinker* is a person who seeks an intellectual understanding and in doing so, merely

thinks about the prayer and often does not experience it.

The *feeler* is a person who prays habitually with feeling, but is not interested in intellectually comprehending the prayer.

#### Animal Man

The *seeker* is a person who strives to go beyond the first three responses and in doing so, begins to get a glimpse of a subtler dimension that may be experienced through the recitation of prayer.

#### Homo sapien

The *ashavan* is a person who, through volitional consciousness, realizes and experiences the theory and practice of the religion. The prayer then becomes a living reality which helps in the furtherance of the right thought, word and action based upon truth for its own sake.

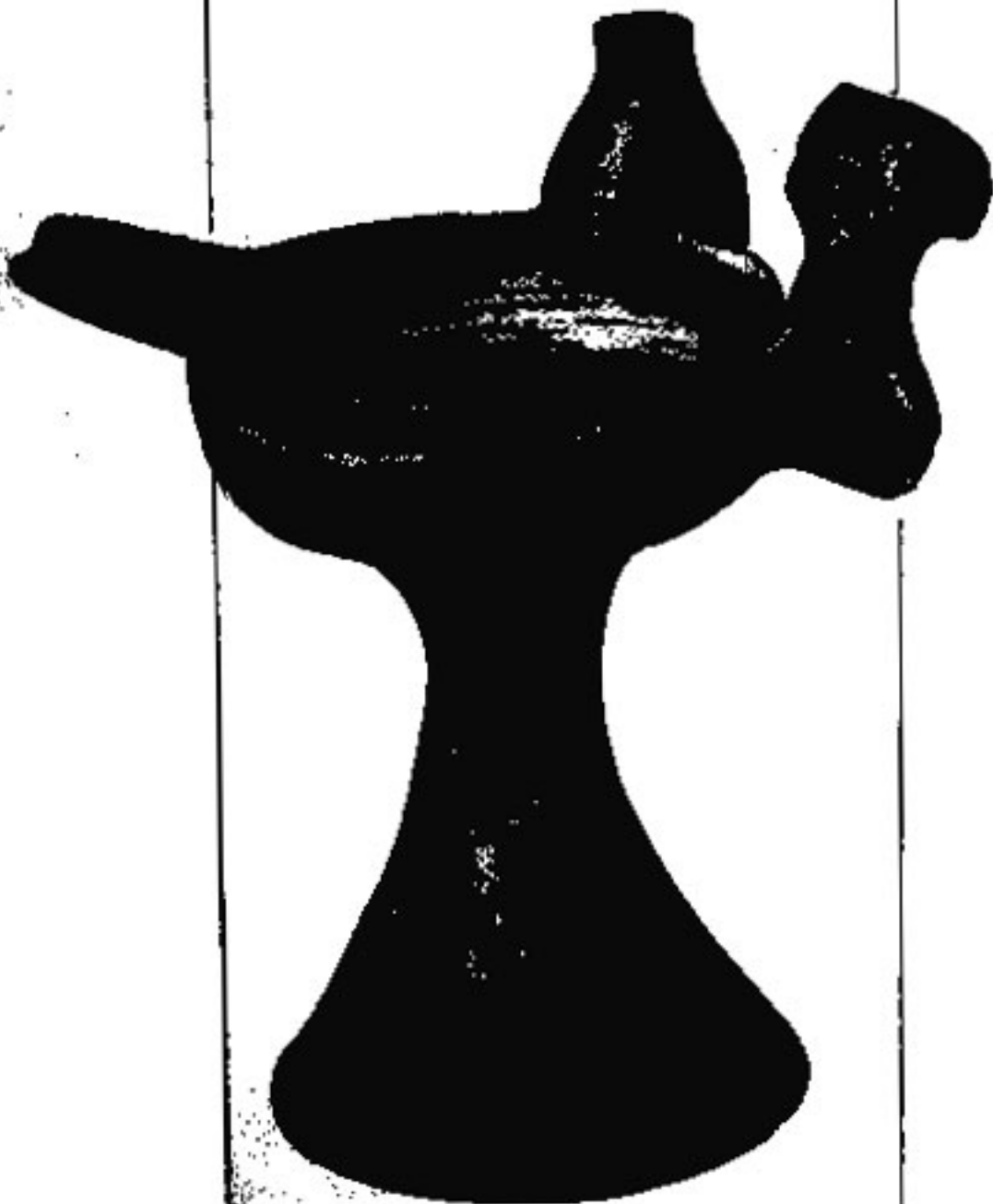
The *cosmic man* is a person who recognizes the macro-cosmic effect rendered through cumulative worship which results in the well-being and furtherance of the whole community. A man at this level knows the source and the spirit that lies within the incarnate word (*spenta māthra*).

The *divine man* is a person who is the bearer of a religious revelation from God or an individual who, through a state of cosmic consciousness, becomes one of the outstanding teachers of the faith. At this level an individual makes history and changes the destiny of his people.

### The Five Watches (*Ph.gāhs*) of the Day

In pre-Zoroastrian times the Iranians divided their worship into three periods. The morning *Hāvani* (*Ph.Hāvan*) watch was under the protection of Mithra whilst the afternoon *Uzayara* (*Ph.Uzērīn*) period was delegated to the guardianship of Apam Napat, the "Son of the Waters". The night constituted the third

A terracotta oil lamp—Khurvin (9th - 8th century B.C.)



period called Aiwisrūthra (*Ph.*Aiwisrūthrim) and this watch was assigned to the *fravashis* of the departed.

Zarathushtra it seems introduced two additional periods, Rapithwā (*Ph.*Rapithwin) and Ushah (*Ph.*Ushahin). The first period was from noon till three o'clock in the afternoon, and this came to be known as the watch of Rapithwin, the "Spirit of the Noon" and the "Lord of Ideal Time "

During the five winter months (*Ābān* to *Spendārmad*), Rapithwin it is believed, goes underground in order that he may give warmth to the roots and waters so that the cycle of regeneration may begin on the first day of spring—*NōRōz*. Thus for these five months, there is a second *Hāvan* watch during which the *Hāvan gāh* prayers are repeated. The other reform that Zarathushtra seems to have introduced was the midnight watch. The period of night therefore was divided into two parts. The first half was called Aiwisrūthra and as before it was assigned to the *fravashis* of the departed, whilst the second half from midnight to dawn was called Ushahin which was dedicated to Sraosh, the Lord of Prayer.

Hence a Zoroastrian is enjoined to pray at least five times a day in order to remember God who, through His agents, maintains a continuous vigil in the world. By communicating with Ahura Mazda, a Zoroastrian learns to talk to his Maker in a special "feeling way" resulting in an indefinable harmony.