

ZOROASTRIANISM

Acknowledged as one of the **earliest monotheistic faiths**, Zoroastrianism was revealed to **Prophet Zarathushtra** who lived in **Persia circa 1800 BCE**. Zarathushtra brought his divine message to humanity through his hymns – the *Gathas*. The religion embraces the worship of one Supreme God, **Ahura Mazda**, and presents a view of our world that is **evolving towards renovation and perfection through the collective good acts of humanity**.

For the first time in human history, man was introduced to the concepts of **choice and free will that man must think for himself before he can believe**. Zarathushtra extolled God to be the mightiest and strongest, though never to be feared; but to be seen as a friend and an ally. His greatest triumph seems to be in revealing to people that **man can both serve and honor God through a rational, ethical structure, rather than through instinctive worship or blind faith**. For him, religion is not an imposition or prescription. It is the presentation of a religious vision – a vision which is a response to the quest of the **human spirit seeking significance of one's existence**.

He did **not** promote the ideas of renunciation, celibacy and deprivation of any form. In fact, life, for Zarathushtra, was based on utter fulfillment and triumph of man. His thrust was for **'Ushta' – 'happiness' both within oneself and of promoting harmony in the environment**. His teachings reflect a cheerful optimism grounded in the fact that **rightful hard work always results in a reward, in both the physical and the spiritual worlds**. He postulated an **after-life for the soul** of man, for it gained merit or retribution in **heaven or hell**, depending upon one's own **thoughts, words, and deeds**. Life for him was a true celebration, and **salvation** was gained through making the **right choices** in life. This in turn, he believed, would bring about the **'frashokereti' – 'making wonderful'** of our world, at which time, **the forces of evil will be rendered ineffective**.

The entire corpus of the Zoroastrian sacred literature is known as **the 'Avesta'**. A smaller compilation of daily prayers used by Zoroastrians is called the **Khordeh Avesta**.

A child is initiated into the religion mostly between the ages of seven and nine years of age in a ceremony called the **'Navjote'** (meaning a new one, who offers prayers), at which time the child is invested with the sacred shirt, **sudreh**, and the sacred girdle, **kushti**. This clothing helps remind the wearer to remain pure in one's thoughts, words, and deeds, and to stay focused on the path of **Asha – Righteousness**, throughout one's life.

The general term for a Zoroastrian priest is **'Mobed'**. To be initiated into priesthood, one has to go through a period of 'studying the scriptures', then through a ceremony called the **'navar' ceremony**, at which time, the new priest earns the title of **'Ervad'** (term used in India), or **'Mobed'** (term used in Iran).

The **Jashan** is the most commonly performed Zoroastrian ceremony, to commemorate any important personal or communal event, solemn or joyous, such as a new home, temple, or business, a marriage or an anniversary, to honor the departed, or any of the many holy days or seasonal festivals (called the **Gahambars**) in the Zoroastrian calendar.

Death in Zoroastrianism is seen as transformation and not total destruction. It is the passing away of spiritual elements of the human being from its physical body. The dead body is considered to be the greatest source of contagion and putrefaction, and has to be disposed off in such a way that it causes the least harm to human beings and the least pollution to other creations. Hence the Zoroastrian scriptures have recognized only one **mode of disposal** of the dead – **dokhme nashini**, which involves placing the corpse on a hilltop or elevated place exposed to sunlight and scavenging birds. In India, a vast majority of Zoroastrians use this mode of disposal for the dead, wherein they place the body in a **dakhma, also known as the Towers of Silence** – a circular stone walled-in enclosure built on a hilltop. In Iran, the Zoroastrians have been using the cemetery much more than the Towers of Silence, over the last fifty years. Those Zoroastrians living in the West, are left with little choice, hence they choose either burial or cremation. Prayer ceremonies are performed for several days after death for the benefit of the soul and to bring solace and peace to the family.

Among faiths practiced in the world today, the religion of Zarathushtra is little known. Yet at one time, it was the **state religion of the Persian Empires** (Achaemenians, Parthians, and Sassanians) that stretched across Central Asia **for a thousand years** (558 BCE to 652 CE). The great Persian kings, **Cyrus, the Great, and Darius, the Great**, both were **Mazdayasnis** (worshippers of Mazda, the Supreme God). Around 700 CE, Persia fell into the hands of the Arabs who wanted to spread their new religion of Islam among the people of the vast Persian Empire. Around 900 CE, some Zoroastrian groups fled Iran for religious freedom, and sought refuge in India. There they came to be known as the ‘Parsees’ (people from Pars or Persia). The Parsees became part of the ‘melting pot’ society of India, and contributed greatly to India’s progress in the fields of education, business, social work, and even in India’s freedom movement. Today, Zoroastrianism is very much a living religion for about 200,000 Zoroastrians in the world. Numbers are growing as more converts are being accepted into the religion.

On an ending note it must be said that Zarathushtra’s contribution should not be seen in his own life and times, but in terms of the profound effect his teachings have had upon some of the other major faiths of the world. He not only gave a new religion to his own people, but left a legacy of beliefs and practices which were to influence the religious and philosophical precepts and paradigms of the larger world.

*“Listen with your ears to the best things
Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself.....”*

(Zarathushtra’s Gâthâs – Yasna 30.2)

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