



The Zoroastrian Religion

A “brief” look at this Ancient living religion

The Origin:

The Zoroastrian religion originated in ancient Iran and was established by the prophet Zoroaster.

The prophet Zoroaster:

The prophet that started the Zoroastrian (Zartoshti) religion is also called Zara-thusht, Ashu Zartosht, Zarathushtra or Zoroaster. The title of Ashu (the Righteous One) is added to his name when he is addressed.

The Birth, Death and Place of origin of Ashu Zartosht:

According to the Pahlavi tradition, it is believed that Ashu Zartosht was born more than 3800 years ago. Ashu Zartosht's place of birth was in the eastern Iranian homelands (which include the areas north and east of the Caspian Sea).

Ahura Mazda or God in Zoroastrianism:

Zoroastrians believe there is only one God. In Avestan language God is called **Ahura Mazda**. *Ahura Mazda*, it is believed by Zoroastrians, is **the essence and knowledge of all existence** and is the creator and upholder of **Asha**. In Avestan language, *Ahura* means the Creator and *Mazda* means wisdom.

The central theme of the Zoroastrian religion - "Asha":

The Zoroastrian religion is based on the concept of *Asha* and is exemplified in the *Ashém Vohu* prayer. In the Zartoshti religion, *Asha* has a deep significance. It indicates the law

which governs the entire creation of *Ahura Mazda* (God). It is the law of progress, movement, harmony, goodness, justice and love. It is the all-embracing law which governs everything, everywhere, and at all times. The word *Asha* in the Avestan language stands for the ultimate Righteousness.

Righteousness, the fundamental principle in the Zartoshti religion, teaches a person to do things in a pious and truthful manner and to lead a life devoid of wrong-doings. *Asha*, in addition to righteousness, incorporates four other philosophies in its meaning:

[1] Truth, [2] Purity, [3] Social justice and [4] The Order of the Universe.

Within the concept of *Asha*, lies a three-tiered perspective. *Asha*, on a physical level is best observed by the exacting order that exists in the universe; On a psychological level, *Asha* is the powerful force of truth every Zartoshti is taught to recognize, whereas; On a Spiritual level, *Asha* is the fusion of order and truth, leading man onto the path of righteousness. Order, truth and righteousness are therefore the three main qualities that underlie the concept of *Asha* and understanding and following path of *Asha* is the key to happiness (*Ushta*).

The Amesha Spentas:

In Zartoshti philosophy, the *Amesha-Spentas* are the attributes and essence of *Ahura Mazda*. Knowing and living the qualities assigned to that *Amesha-Spenta*, guides a person to experience *Ahura Mazda* (God). In the Avestan language, *Amesha* means immortal, and *Spenta* means holy or bountiful.

In the Avesta (the Zartoshti prayers), the following six *Amesha-Spentas* are mentioned:

1. The First *Amesha-Spenta*: **Vohu-Man** represents the good mind. The *Vohuman Amesha-Spenta* enables a human being to understand and choose correctly between good and bad. This *Amesha-Spenta* is symbolized by the living beings.
2. The Second *Amesha-Spenta*: **Asha-Vahishta** stands for truth and righteousness. This *Amesha-Spenta* is symbolized by the fire.
3. The Third *Amesha-Spenta*: **Khshatra-Vairya** stands for the best dominion. This *Amesha-Spenta* includes the power of controlling wrong behavior with coordination of feelings and wisdom, the power of following Asha's path, the power of defending one's right and defeating lies, the strength to reach freedom in thinking, the strength of devotion & love,... . This *Amesha-Spenta* is symbolized by the sky and the elements.
4. The Fourth *Amesha-Spenta*: **Spenta-Armaiti** stands for devotion and love. Ashu Zaratusht believes that God and human's relationship is based on friendship & love but not horror & dread. So, one must nurture love in himself. This *Amesha-Spenta* is symbolized by the earth and universe.
5. The Fifth *Amesha-Spenta*: **Ha-urvatat** stands for perfection. This *Amesha-Spenta* symbolically shows the good and the perfection of God. It is symbolized by the waters.
6. The Sixth *Amesha-Spenta*: **Ameratat** stands for immortality. This *Amesha-Spenta* keeps God's creations alive. It is symbolized by the plant kingdom.

The Zoroastrian Purpose of Life is to renew this existence:

A Zartoshti is urged to lead an active, industrious, honest and above all a charitable life. Also, a Zartoshti is taught to learn from the qualities of the *Amesha-Spentas* to formulate an ethical policy of the Good living. This awareness leads to the right thought, the right word and the right deed; the key to unquestionably becoming the righteous person.

Scriptures

The Holy *Gathas*:

The *Gathas* are the Songs (or teachings) of Ashu Zartosht. He outlined His philosophy and His solution for His disciples in the *Gathas*. They are and remain the message of Hope and Happiness for mankind. They motivate a human being to become Good instinctively. The poetry is profoundly instructive. The *Gathas* were probably first systematically written down as late as the sixth century A.D., when the Avestan alphabet was invented.

The *Avesta* prayers:

The *Avesta* prayers or the *Yasna* is the main collection of prayers and is divided into 72 chapters. The Holy *Gathas* are now a part of *Yasna* prayers.

The Pillars of the Zoroastrian religion:

The Three Divine Principles

The religion that Ashu Zartosht brought to mankind is based on the following three Divine Rules in sequence:

1. **Humata** or “Good Thoughts”. Thought is the basis of all behaviors of mankind.
2. **Hukhta** or “Good Words” or being truthful and honest in ones words.
3. **Hvareshta** or Good Deeds or actions. This principle teaches one to always perform good and useful deeds and to avoid actions that can cause harm to God's creations.

Good and Evil in the Zoroastrian Religion:

In the *Gathas* (the hymns of the prophet) Ashu Zartosht talks about the twin forces of nature, namely the Spenta Mainyu (the progressive mind or active thinking) and the Aka Mainyu, (the regressive mind or destructive). Zartoshti religion is about choosing between these two mentalities. It is life versus the negation of life. Spenta Mainyu (mainyu=thought) creates Good thoughts, which leads to words and deeds, while Aka Mainyu generates inertia and inactivity. There are two paths available to mankind - the good and the evil. The choice is upon a person to choose the good path.

Also mentioned in the *Gathas*, Ashu Zartosht says that man (generic) was first given the *Gaéthâos* (the physical body). Then he was granted *Daena* (conscience). Next given *Mananghâ* (the power of thought). Then God gave man the *Ushtanem* (life) followed by *Shyaothnâ* (the wisdom of action and free will) to judge between the right and the wrong. Finally man was given the *Senghas* (words/teachings/the knowledge) to act on.

In Zartoshti philosophy, God does not decide for man and is not responsible for man's actions. Instead God has given man all the faculties to make the *Dâyeté* (the right of free choice) and bear the consequences of that choice. Ashu Zartosht was influential in preaching that **every individual has the Good Mind and should use it to choose between the Good and Evil**. By choosing the Good path as opposed to the evil one, the individual can find happiness and salvation.

Heaven and Hell

Those who use their conscience and wisdom to follow the Path of Asha, will receive salvation and happiness. Those who choose bad thoughts and act against the law of Asha, bring about bad word and bad deeds and will receive the result of their behavior based on the law of action and reaction. From this point of view God has never created Hell for punishment. It is the human behavior that creates Heaven or Hell for his soul.

Paradise (*Vahisstem Mano*) or the best spiritual place – which is reaching happiness and spiritual serenity – is the reflection of good thoughts, words and deeds. Hell (*Achisstem Mano*) or the worst spiritual place is conscious suffering and spiritual depression and is reflection of bad thoughts, words and deeds coming back to the person in this material and spiritual worlds.

Outward symbols of Zoroastrian religion and their significance

The Fire

Fire and light are symbols of Zartoshti religion; the physical fire as manifestation of purity and truth; and the fire-within as the inspiring force that drives us to bring about goodness in this world. Since ancient times fire has come to be recognized as

the symbol of truth. Active promotion of truth for truth's sake is what is expected of individuals.

The Sedreh

The Sedreh (or Sudreh) - is a white undershirt and made of cotton. It is an outward physical symbol which a Zoroastrian wears after initiation (Navjote or Sedreh-Pushi ceremony has been performed).

The Koshti - the girdle of Righteousness:

The Koshti (Kusti) is a woven woolen cord. It is an outward physical symbol of the religion, which is worn by Zartoshtis around the waist and on the Sedreh after initiation.

The Fravahar Symbol:



The Fravahar is a Zartoshti religious symbol. It represents a force that directs all of Ahura Mazda's (God's) creations to progress (Progressive force).

Seasonal Festivals (Now-Rouz and Gahanbars):

In the Zartoshti religion, there are seven major religious festivals in the year, which are linked to *Ahura Mazda* (Now-rouz or New Year) and the six Amesha Spentas (the Six Seasonal Gahanbars). The most important Jashn or festival of the Zartoshtis is Now-Rouz (New Year day). According to the seasonal calendar it falls on the 21st of March every year which is also the first day of spring. It is also when the day and night are equal. This festival is associated with fire - one

of the creations of God. Fire in turn is linked to the *Asha Vahishta* (the best truth).

Gahanbars are celebrated by Zoroastrians as a part of their religious duty and the emphasis is on harmony and unity in community. It also gives a Zartoshti a chance to be grateful.

Each Gahanbar in ancient Iran was celebrated for five days. Each one was based to fit the harvest times of the agricultural society of those times. Today, only the fifth and the last day are celebrated. These festivals fulfilled a dual role in which the participants gathered to worship, as well as we're encouraged to be joyous and happy. Traditionally, a Gahanbar gave families a chance to share their harvest, do trade and exchange greetings and get their children married. During a Gahanbar, special food is served and people, the rich and poor alike, come together in order to share the spirit of oneness within the religion.

The Zoroastrian religion in Ancient Iran

The legendary History:

The Pishdadian Dynasty:

The history of ancient Iranians is contained in legends and preserved over time with varying degrees of authenticity and epic poetry. Kiumars was the first king of the Iranians during the stone ages, as described in the Shahnameh (the Book of Kings and written by the poet Ferdowsi).

The Kianian Dynasty:

The legendary dynasty that followed was the Kianian Dynasty. This was a period of many tribal wars among Persian and neighboring tribes.

Ashu Zartosht preached His religion during the reign of King Kai-Vistasp. Soon after the death of Ashu Zartosht and King Kai-Vishtasp, the Kianian dynasty ended.

The Documented History - The Zartoshti Dynasties

For over a thousand years, from about 560 B.C.E. to 652 A.D., the religion taught by Ashu Zartosht was practiced by people of the Persian Empire.

555 B.C.E. to 330 B.C.E. - The Achaemenian (Hakhamanian) Empire:

The Empire was founded by Cyrus (Kourosh in Iranian language) the Great, the great-great-grandson of Hakhamanish, the first ruler of Persia. Cyrus was a great military leader and set forth a tradition of tolerance which was to be characteristic of the Achaemenid state. He also set the pattern for the first "Universal Empire" - an empire not bound by linguistics or ethnic frontiers. Two other famous kings that ruled during these dynasties were - Darius and Xerxes (Daryoush and Khashayar respectively in Iranian language).

330 B.C.E. to 250 B.C.E. - The Seleucid Empire:

Darius III, the last of the Achaemenid emperors was defeated in 330 B.C.E. by Alexander of Macedonia, who burned the palace of Persepolis in Shiraz and the treasured library containing religious literature. After the death of Alexander, the Greeks ruled the Iranians for about 70 years.

250 B.C.E. to 226 A.D.E. - The Parthian Dynasty:

The Parthian Dynasty was founded by Arask who rebelled against the Greek Seleucids. During this period the Zartoshti religion existed in many forms.

226 A.D.E. to 641 A.D.E.
The Sassanian Dynasty

The founder of this dynasty was Ardeshir Babakan a prince from the province of Pars. King Ardeshir appointed the Zartoshti religion as the state religion and created the powerful office of the Zartoshti high priest.

Yazdegard III last ruler of an empire tried to defend a weakened Iran against the Arab invasion but lost the throne in two battles in Qadissaya and Nihavand. He was the last Zartoshti king of Persia.

The Introduction of Islam:

In the seventh century A.D., the Arabs conquered Persia and gradually imposed the religion of Islam on its people. Laws were enacted to force Zartoshtis to accept the religion of Islam. Among the laws introduced was the imposition of a tax called 'Jaziyeh' which every non-Moslem had to pay. The Zartoshti religion did survive during those trying times.

Many Zartoshtis decided to leave their mother land and immigrate to India. This group of Zoroastrians is today known as Parsees.

The persecution of Zartoshtis in Iran was intensified during the ninth and tenth centuries under the Arab Caliphs and in the eleventh through fourteenth century under the Turks.

In the 13th century, Zartoshtis migrated to Yazd and Kerman and lived in poverty and obscurity to preserve their Zartoshti heritage.

In the 16th century, the Safavid Dynasty was established and the Moslem Shia faith was made the official creed of Iran. Hence a new attempt for conversion of non-Shias into the Shia

faith was launched. A large number of Zartoshtis were forced to leave Yazd and Kerman and settle as farmers around Isfahan, the capital of the Safavids. This created intense pressure on the Zartoshtis to keep their religion.

In the early 17th century, several hundred thousand Zartoshtis were massacred in Isfahan by the last ruler of the Safavid dynasty. The final blows came during the Afghan invasion and the Qajar dynasty, where the number of Zartoshtis was reduced to thousands.

During all these harsh years, the Zartoshtis of Iran managed to preserve their practices. They saved some of their religious books by sending them to their co-religionists in India.

In the 19th century, the number of Zartoshtis in Iran had dwindled to about 12,000 living in Yazd and Kerman in poverty. They were not allowed to travel, touch the food in the Bazaars (lest it get contaminated), to go outdoors on rainy days, or to mix and interact with Moslems. They also had to continue to pay the religious tax of 'Jaziyeh' which was very burdensome.

In the second half of the 19th century, living conditions improved when Parsees in India became interested in their co-religionists in Iran. A benefactor named Maneckjee Limji Hataria was commissioned to go to Iran to intervene on behalf of the Zartoshtis with the Qajar kings. His direct negotiations and diplomacy resulted in some alleviation of religious pressure.

Since the establishment of the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1923, and because of their pride in ancient Iranian history and culture, Zartoshtis have played an important part in the modernization and industrialization of the country. They served the nation in different high capacities both in the public and private sectors.

They became famous and prominent administrators, bankers, doctors, merchants, educators, accountants and industrialists.

The Zoroastrians today:

Today, it is estimated that the total number of born Zoroastrians in the world is about 200,000 - 300,000. They live and contribute to the world community, primarily in India, in Iran, in North America and smaller pockets in Europe, Pakistan, Africa and Australia. Wherever they have settled, Zoroastrians have served well the countries of their adoption. Zoroastrians world-wide comprise an educated, benevolent and a very professional community.

Due to lack of data the number of born again/new Zoroastrians are unknown but it is estimated that many have chosen this religion in countries such as USA, Canada, Brazil, Australia, Venezuela, China, Tajikistan, Sweden, ...

The information in this brochure is for educational and information purposes only. Like a bouquet from selected flowers, the information has been selected from many sources.



California Zoroastrian Center
8952 Hazard Avenue
Westminster, ca 92683
Ph: (714) 893-4737
Email: info@czc.org
www.californiazoroastriancenter.org