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A Journey through the Zoroastrian Experience

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Today, may I suggest we follow together the different steps of the spiritual journey of a person who is moving through the Zoroastrian experience, and find out how he sees the world and life, or more precisely, how he thinks, speaks and acts in his daily life, as well as in the vastness of his own experience.

Knowing that the three leitmotifs of Zarathustra's philosophy established around 3000 years ago are:

- right thinking
- right speaking, and
- right acting,

we are going to see how our 'man' conceives and interprets the word "right"; how he achieves it and how he integrates it in his own self.¹

To start with, he knows that he, as anybody else, was not born a 'Zoroastrian'. He will become one later, if he so wishes, only through an experience or a journey on an existential road called by an old Persian name *Arta*. This concept denotes harmony, righteousness, and existential order, or harmony in the righteousness with the existential order. This word became *Asha* and is used under this form until today. I prefer, nevertheless, the word *Arta*, which is closer to Zarathustra's language and philosophy.²

However, on *Arta*, the road of existence, our man, in his first steps under the guidance of a teacher, starts to know himself, and attempts to find an answer to the difficult question "Who am I?" To do this, he will apply some methods based on Zoroastrian traditions, such as dialogues, inner investigations and outer observations. As he advances he will find out that he is made out mainly of two different changing worlds, linked to each other.

The first and the widest one is his inner world. This is the unlimited place of his thoughts, consciousness, ideas, emotions, feelings, imagination and creativity. This inner and spiritual world is called *Menok* (later transformed into *Minou* and in English into 'mind', or 'mental'). It leads to the understanding of his own truth.

The second world, smaller, drives him to the comprehension of his reality called *Getig* (later transformed into *Gitti*). This is his outer world which can be experienced by his five senses. It involves his environment and the concrete and material aspect of his life.

In an attempt to build a bridge between these two apparently different worlds: the world of truth and the world of reality, he will find out very soon, first, that he should know the nature of these worlds of which his existence is made and understand how they function.

To do so, he begins by the first and the widest one: his inner world.

Going deep into this inner and invisible world of his, he will see that it is made of many sorts of energies and forces, continuously in movement and in interaction. Observing the movement of these forces in himself, he will realize that in every instant, every second, they polarize into two opposite forms of energy, and carry - to use Zarathustra's language - a merciless struggle.

¹ See M. Boyce, *The Zoroastrians* (Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices), London, 1986 edn., p. 23.

² K. Khazai (Pardis), *Les voyageurs d'Arta* (Les sources de savoir), Brussels, 1993.

One is the positive energy expressed by light, knowledge, love, justice, truth and joy. It is called Ahura Mazda. This energy is both feminine and masculine. The other is a negative force expressed by darkness, ignorance, hatred, injustice, lies and sadness. It is called Angra Maynu (or Mainyu), later abbreviated into Ahriman. The English words 'anger' and 'anxiety' come precisely from the term Angra Maynu. This energy is also feminine and masculine. He will notice that these two varying forces penetrate him ceaselessly, as they get through every being; and in this uncompromising war the biggest battlefield is his inner world, and every truly important battle wages within himself.

The outer expression of these two opposite energies he will perceive in the form of joy and sadness, happiness and suffering, love and hatred, knowledge and ignorance, clarity and ambiguity, truth and lie, justice and injustice, wisdom and foolishness.

Little by little, while progressing on the road of *Arta*, he will find another feature in himself: freedom or more precisely the freedom to choose between these two varying energies and the possibility to participate in this existential battle. He can choose the positive one, Ahura Mazda, as he can choose the negative one, Angra Maynu (or Ahriman). He can even choose neither of them. In the first and the second case he will be involved actively in the formation of his destiny and future in a positive or negative direction according to his choice. In the last case, as he stays out of this battle, he *cannot* participate in the formation of his destiny, and he will be drawn by the events in uncontrolled directions.

In moving through the Zoroastrian experience on the road of *Arta*, he will take the side, actively and without any compromise, for the positive energies of Ahura Mazda, and will fight the negative energies of Angra Maynu. Concretely he will have to fight in his inner battlefield in his heart and in his mind, the energies of sorrow and sadness, injustice and lies, ignorance, hatred and darkness by the energies of joy and happiness, justice and righteousness, knowledge, love and light.

This cosmic war takes place in him, not once and for all, but at every instant, every moment of his life. He will see by himself that the Zoroastrian experience is a dynamic and not a static one, and he will, therefore, have to be vigilant and watchful, and never forget that every victory is fragile and short-lived, because each day, each situation, brings with it new uncertainties with which to cope.

In participating in the existential war, he becomes a cosmic fighter or - to use a Zoroastrian term for it - an *Artavan* (later deformed into *Ashanan*). Nietzsche was inspired by this notion in his book *So spoke Zarathustra* and called it "Superman".³ And as a cosmic fighter he knows that the existence is nothing else but a succession of creation, destruction and re-creation; a chain of birth, death and rebirth in every moment of life. So, he will fight ceaselessly the darkness and the injustice through his evolutive existence without any fear. He knows that fear is nothing else but the absence of the light of Ahura Mazda within him; an obstacle to courage; the courage to see and confront feelings and ideas within himself that are ugly, unjust and sad; if he is to receive the beauty, rightness and joyful aspects of himself. Once fear has been dispelled, torpor, passivity, habit and attachment to the past become the next obstacles in his way to be overcome, and he must overcome them because he knows that the essence of the road to *Arta* is evolution, and evolution implies not to be stuck to the past, but to integrate the past within himself if he is to move freely towards the future.

But in his way, nevertheless, it happens that he meets again and again doubt and self-doubt. He asks questions and seeks answers: Why do they exist, all these negative energies of ugliness, suffering and evil? Why sorrow? Why sadness? Why defeat? How can he understand the sense or the non-sense of all these dualities, struggles and changes? Where have the people gone whom I have loved and lost?

As his progression goes on he finds the answers by himself somewhere on the road of *Arta*.

He will see that in his world, no light can be seen unless it meets a resistance. Nothing is admitted

³ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (trans. T. Common, rev. O. Levy and J.L. Beevers), London, 1932.

as truth unless, facing it, there is falsehood, and nothing is recognized as joy unless in front of it there is another feeling called sadness and suffering.

He will see that life without death, infinity without limitation, eternity without instant, big without small, hot without cold, day without night, beauty without ugliness have no meaning at all. He will see that in this world everything is recognized by its opposite, and everything can be a force if in front of it there is its contrary.

He will learn that while he knew happiness by suffering, eternity by instant and the light by darkness, he must defeat one of the biggest enemies: forgetfulness, because men sooner or later forget that nothing is permanent, and nothing is obtained once and for all. They forget that immovable happiness is nothing else but boredom, and immovable wealth is nothing else but burden. Once clarity is made in his inner world and confusions dispelled, he will act in his outer world, the world of realities and everyday life in the same way helped by his inner clarity and his rightness. In building a bridge between these two worlds, *Menok* and *Gettig*, he can then move through a much larger space with a larger perspective in his life.

From now on he knows that his only saviour is nobody else but himself, and on the road of *Arta* he will not meet any master but companions, friends and the seekers that share with him an experience or a knowledge.

Some of these companions could be a *Soshian* for him, which means a momentary guide who by advice or teaching influences his life in a positive and harmonious way, as he himself can be a *Soshian* or a positive guide for the others in another moment and in other circumstances. Even Ahura Mazda is a friend and not a master to him. He recalls Zarathustra's prayers to Ahura Mazda which can begin with "O, Ahura Mazda. I have something to ask you. Tell me, advise me like a friend to this friend..."⁴

On his road he will meet also other companions called Mobed and Hirbod, whose essential role consists not only in keeping the flame of Zarathustra's philosophy alive but also and specially in preventing the seekers from falling into the abyss of superstition.

In making the experience of truth and of reality, he will find out that these two apparently different worlds not only can be superimposed on each other but they can also continue to live separated one from another. In his daily life he can easily make the experience of this finding. For example: every day he passes by hundreds of persons in the streets. Even though these persons are real, material and concrete, he does not feel them; perhaps he does not even see them.

On the contrary, if he physically loses a dear and loved person, he will more than ever feel in the deepest of his inner world the presence of this lost person. This person does not exist any more in the real, tri-dimensional and physical world, but he continues to live at another level of existence related to his inner world, his world of truth and that of those who have loved him. They communicate with each other by the intermediary of their truthdom.

Therefore, on his road of *Arta*, he is not to choose *between* these two worlds so different, but to recognize their respective particularities, perhaps their complementariness, and to integrate them into his own existence. In this case he can see by himself and in himself the infinity of truth but also the finity of reality. From now on, the question is not for him to know if he is mortal or immortal, finite or infinite, but if he identifies himself with what is mortal and ephemeral or with what is infinite and imperishable.

This is the beginning of the real freedom for him: a road with a large view of existence and without fear. In this new step of his life, he can, from now on, not only choose his values and his dreams, but also his manner of thinking, speaking and acting. As from that point on, nobody will think in his place, live in his place or die in his place.

⁴ E.g., *Yas.* 44.1, 2.

He is now an Artavan, a man or a woman for whom life and death, visible and invisible, past and future, truth and reality, interior and exterior, instant and eternity are dissolved into another and have become the one and the same thing.

Later, on the road of Arta he will find out something else, curious, but very interesting. He will notice that not only by his thinking, speaking and acting, but also by his feelings, consciousness, imagination, desires, and hopes, he is developing in himself, moment after moment, day after day, an inner child. This inner being called in Zarathustra's philosophy *Ravan*, will form his spiritual self. But how does his *Ravan* work and function? Not only through the infinity of his existence but also in his daily life.

If he would like to know this, he should go deeper into the question. Then he will learn that this inner child within him is constantly changing, growing and shaped by his thoughts, consciousness, feelings, emotions, memory, words and actions whether they are positive or negative. And while this spiritual body is above space and time, it will survive after his physical death, and continue its growth, evolution and purification at another level of existence.

Meanwhile, the struggle between the two dual energies, positive and negative, emanating respectively from Ahura Mazda and Angra Maynu, goes on in the spiritual level of his existence after his physical death. This cosmic war continues within his spiritual self or *Ravan* which still has freedom of choice and possibility of participation in this battle until its total purification. It implies the eventual total victory of positive energies of Ahura Mazda over the negative energies of Angra Maynu. This moment will be the end of the battles and the conquest of the serenity and light. It can be achieved on this earth or at another level of existence after physical death.

This spiritual body, *Ravan*, has a very important region called *Daena*, which acts as an inner mirror able to attract a particular type of energy, named *Faravarti* or *Farvahar*. The function of *Faravartis* that are everywhere in the existential universe is to enlighten his choice and decisions, and to guide him through his material and his spiritual life.

Consequently, the *Faravartis* are the guiding energies charged with ideas and light that exist before any material creation and can illuminate, if they are attracted by the *Daena*, the way and the decision of any individual. In this context, the more the *Daena* is clean, bright and free of dust, the better it can catch these guiding energies, *Faravartis*. And the more it is dirty, opaque and dusty, the more it has difficulty in absorbing them. The most efficient elements that can dedust and clean this inner mirror are right thinking, right speaking and right acting. And the three elements that can dirty this inner mirror are wrong thinking, wrong speaking and wrong acting.

Plato, the Greek philosopher, was inspired by this Zoroastrian concept and thus developed his theory of "Idea and Archetype". Much later these very *Faravartis* were integrated into the Jewish and Christian traditions under the name of "angels", that is, of course, far from the original meaning. At the same time the concept of *Ravan* was transformed to what has become a more common notion of "soul", Ahura Mazda to Yahvé and the negative energies, Angra Maynu took the name Satan in the same Judaeo-Christian religious trajectory. While in the Zoroastrian conception Ahura Mazda and Angra Maynu are both self-created, Jews and Christians considered Satan as a creation of God.⁵

Referring back to our man, if he has not succeeded in purifying his *Daena* during his earthy life, he still has time to do so at his new level of existence. Indeed, according to the line of this philosophy, he will inevitably follow the path of his evolution, and evolution means also the correction of the mistakes that he has committed in the creation of his inner being. He will then understand that paradise or hell has been nothing else than the specific states of existence that he has created in every moment for himself, according to his choice of positive or negative energies. He will also see in the infinity of existence that the *Ravan* or "inner self" of those who have loved each other

⁵ Albeit created good with the freedom to choose between good and evil [Eds.]. Cf. T. van Baaren, "A Few Essential Remarks Concerning Positive and Negative Relations between Gods", in H.G. Kippenburg *et al.*, (eds.), *Struggles of Gods: Papers of the Groningen Work Group for the Study of the History of Religions* (Religion and Reason 31), Berlin, 1984, pp 8ff.

on this earth, will coexist after their physical death, because the energies of love concentrated in their *Daena* attract one another. On the contrary, the *Ravan* or “inner self” of those who have hated each other will go far away from one another, because the hatred keeps in itself the force of repulsion.

Let us come back once again on the earth and follow our man in his existential journey. On the road of *Arta* he will get into a joyful world which does not allow any sadness or suffering, as they are considered as enemies to fight in every moment of life.

He recalls these important and highly symbolic words, told and repeated through the century about Zarathustra “who was born with a smile, lived with a smile and died with a smile”. In this context Pliny, the Roman naturalist of the first century, could write that Zarathustra was the first child to be born with a smile on his lips.⁶ This legend but powerful symbol is one among many others which indicate the joyful way of *Arta*.

That is why our man will meet on his road about thirty different festivities per year that cover altogether around one hundred days. The most important is the celebration of the renewal of nature in the first day of spring, the 21st of March. This is the beginning of the new year called *Nowrouz*. Its celebration lasts about two weeks. The second important festivity is the celebration of love and light, called *Mehregan*. This festivity glorifying Mithra or the Sun lasts six days (from the 5th to the 11th October). On his way he will also meet many other festivities, such as those celebrating the creation of the sun, of the moon, of the earth, of the stars, of woman, of man, of animals, of plants, of water and of fire. The fire he will see as the great symbol of the inner purification, the fusion and the outer solidarity between every being. That is why he goes to the fire temple, *Atashkadeh*, for meditation and praying. But he meditates also in front of the sun, or the flowers, where there is something nice and beautiful.

Every year during the plant festivities he should plant a tree and have a particular attention to the well-being of animals and nature, because he knows that his happiness depends on that of every being, including animals and plants. In this philosophy the animals have also a soul. The joy and being joyful is so important for him, that he will even learn not to mourn for the death of his beloved ones and his friends. So on this occasion he will celebrate with other friends the festivity of soul, because in the depth of his inner world he knows that the lost person never really left him; he communicates with him not with words but in the language of feelings.

So, together with his family and his friends, he puts on a white dress, drinks the best wine, and with the sound of music he accompanies the lost beloved person. According to the most ancient tradition the dead body was incinerated and the ashes were spread or put inside specific places. The silent towers that we may meet today, in which the bodies are exposed in the open air, were created many centuries after Zarathustra, and they are on the way to being abandoned.

Thirty days after a death, it will be the day of remembrance. Again, he will meet friends and family to celebrate the memory and the existence of the dead person.

Continuing his way to the world of reality and everyday life, our man meets traditions that are based upon strict equality of right and respect between man and woman. It is astonishing to see that this very old philosophy established around 3000 years ago insists so much, of course in its own language, on this subject. The best and the most powerful example is given by what is called by the term *Amesha Spenta* or *Amshaspandan*, or seven immortal energies.

In the Centre Ahura Mazda the first and the supreme energy is flanked by six other energies: three of them are feminine and three are masculine. The three feminine energies, namely moderation, health and immortality, face the three masculine energies which are cosmic order, right thinking and kingdom of light. Each party is placed on either side of Ahura Mazda, in a strict symmetrical position. It is perhaps interesting to know that the term *Spenta* later gave birth to the English word Saint, of course through the Latin language.

⁶ *Hist. nat.*, XXX.

The equality between man and woman naturally reflects on the type of relationship or of marriage that is monogamous. In this context the heritage is then shared equally between the children, whether they are boys or girls.

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To finish this lecture, let me please once again come back to our man and find him reading some words from the sacred *Avesta* and the “Book of creation” *Bundahisn*.

Many of these words have travelled for 3000 years to reach him today, on the verge of the 21st century. Its essence is the following:

In the depth of my thought, from where I could not go further, I asked Ahura Mazda to advise me, as one would advise a friend. I asked him if a day would come when the armies of Lies and Treachery would be destroyed, and when the chains of slavery of men would be broken. I asked him if a day would come when these corrupted and lying governors and religious guides, who in the name of their bloodthirsty and revengeful gods kill, and who draw their power from the ignorance of the people, would be overruled for ever?” And Ahura Mazda with great wisdom said to me: “Yes, the Armies of Lies and Treachery will be defeated, but only by the women and men who will choose the existential struggle rather than my protection. They will be able to fight Treachery and Lies by the means of the three most efficient arts which I have given to men: the right thinking, the right speaking and the right acting.⁷

⁷ This is a free written encapsulation of the Zoroastrian hope based on the above-mentioned texts [Eds.].