

## 'The Enlightenment' message of Zarathushtra

*[The article is based on two illuminating lectures delivered by Professor Kaikhosrov D. Irani to large audiences in Sydney, Australia]*

**“The Enlightenment”, an intellectual movement, which became influential as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, was a pursuit centered on confidence in the human capacity for thought and judgment.** Its roots, in fact go much, much further. It was believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition and tyranny and to build a better world. Accordingly, if we are permitted to think free from the interference of mythology, magic, social and political pressures for or against maintaining something or other, we are capable of comprehending, evaluating and acting rationally and responsibly. It follows that beliefs must be rational and actions must be principled, i. e. rationally accepted. It is well known that religious beliefs are accepted on faith, not reason. ‘The Enlightenment’ attitude demands that what is accepted on faith not be contrary to rational belief - that religious beliefs move beyond the miraculous myths and stories.

Traditionally, religions provide stories around the lives of their founders and their teachings. From these there emerge various religious visions. In most modern religions the following two are present: - A **View of the World** and a **Way of Life**. From the ‘Enlightenment’ point of view, if these two find acceptance in the consciousness of the believer, it can provide a sense of significance and purpose to the believer’s life. Without a direction for a way of life a religious belief is functionless. Immanuel Kant formulated the requirements for the religious faith thus:

1. Belief without a vision of the nature of existence is blind.
2. Belief without a commitment to a way of life is empty.

**The remarkable insight of Zarathushtra fits very clearly into this mode of thought.** He asks his followers to **(i)** view the world as a conflicted world, meant to be perfect, orderly and harmonious, but suffering the contamination of evil and **(ii)** strive to transform any situation of evil, disturbed harmony, injustice or suffering and bring it in accord with Asha - Righteous Order; which we are capable of realizing with our God-given Vohu Mana - Good Mind. Good human beings striving to promote the good, bring about with the help of social intelligence, the good society. And, gradually, as such a society comes into existence, human beings reap the benefits of the life of Righteous Order. A good society is established to provide and ensure

**1)** the satisfaction of humans through their self-realization and

**2)** the maximization of justice (minimizing undeserved benefits as well as burdens). It further strives to balance these demands with insight and with the recognition of the limitations of this imperfect world.

Some religious traditions, beliefs and practices prevail with no concern for their rationality and on the grounds of their traditionalism only. Frequently, commentaries written in some sacred book is accepted only because ‘that is the word of God’. The recognition of that is a distinctly non-Enlightenment attitude but ultimately it is still the believer’s decision. The extraordinary

transformation that Zarathushtra generated in the history of human thought consisted of **two significant ideas**: -

1. **Faith is not a matter of membership or affiliation to a group but a matter of personal conscience arrived at through individual choice** and, 2. **Faith is primarily and essentially a commitment to a moral life - a life dedicated to perfecting society**. But one must feel surprised, perhaps with sadness, that not only is this not widely known among Zarathushtrians, but also neither is it generally expounded by those responsible for the transmission of his teachings.

**The most valuable possession every human being can ever have is ‘Individuality’**, a blend of our physical being (Tanu) and a spiritual component, the soul (Urvan); this gives us a **unique personality deserving of dignity and respect**. The Self of the Individual is the seat of consciousness and self-consciousness, hence, of thought, feeling and judgment. Thus persons, and only they as individuals, sensitive to values and reflective about options, are the ones that generate and maintain a just society. A just society, in return, promotes the realisation of individual goodness and happiness of its members. A good society is one where practices are so regulated that the interests of individuals are not trampled upon indiscriminately, only minimally curtailed as essential rules. Human beings live in a collective structure and their values lie in such a balance of interests within the structure so constructed that we minimise the interference of the satisfaction of one interest upon the satisfaction of another. Arranging such a social order - what we call the Righteous Order - not only needs humans of goodwill, i. e. those who seek the promotion of Asha, but also needs deep understanding of social relations. There is a significant passage in the **Gathas (Yasna 48, verse 5): "Let those who know how to rule well, and not the evil rulers, rule us! Let them rule us with wisdom and skill, O Armaiti!"**

Zarathushtra's Religion 'Veh-din' (Pahlavi: 'the Good Religion') is the religion of commitment, constant striving and responsibility. It is not a religion of comfort and certainly not a religion of renunciation. Often, it is common for religious persons to view religion as a technique of offering prayers of praise and glorification and asking, in return, various gifts and boons e. g. health, wealth, success or the satisfaction of some hope or aspiration or, sometimes, even the discomfiture of an enemy. This is a very primitive religious conception of offering and asking. It is child-like in simplicity and does not respect human dignity. Its pathetic picture of human self-respect is often blurred by attempts at making such practices appear beautiful. It is such pretence that 'the Enlightenment' attitude attempts to deflate.

**A moral view of the world and a striving for promoting the Righteous Order**, which Zarathushtra asks us to adopt upon illumined reflection, **presents a noble picture of the human spirit and respect for human reason and freedom**. And in doing so, *Zarathushtra was, perhaps, the earliest proponents of the Enlightenment Theology in human history*. A believer takes himself to be able to recognize a wrong, whether it is in individual relations or in the functioning of society. In the theology of Zarathushtra we are taken to have the capacity for such discernment. But this needs to be developed by appropriate moral direction and guidance. Thus, insightful moral education is not a matter of providing prescriptions of what to do and not to do. *The Gathas are totally free of prescriptions*. What is to be taught is the

notion of the 'Good', i.e. what is right - the Righteous Order, not in its universal totality, but in its ***embodiment in every human situation – to be ‘just’***. And this each one of us can recognize because we have the God-given Good Mind (Vohu Mana) for that task. And **where it is violated, we recognize that there is a moral flaw, our consciousness being equipped to do so, benumbed with large doses of self-interest and selfishness**. The Holy Pontiff, Adarbad Mahraspand emphasized: ***‘Let there be no one who fails to recognize the face of injustice’***.

As humans advance in moral intelligence, the ability of Vohu Mana promotes a society of Righteous Order, which continues to actualize. And such a progressive society then leads to the moralizing of humans and brings them to ***a state of enlightened happiness, Ushta***. Such is the ethical stance and cosmic optimism of Zarathushtra's message to humanity.

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