

Learning from Masters: Ethics and Cosmology in Zarathustra and Hazrat Inayat Khan

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Introduction

An examination of the teachings of the ancient prophet Zarathustra, also known as Zoroaster, can shed light on the insights of the modern-day Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan, and the vision of Inayat Khan can illuminate Zarathustra's message as well. This paper discusses some topics common to the two.

Two Teachers

Hazrat (the term is an honorific meaning honorable) Inayat Khan was born in India in 1882 and came to Europe and North America in 1910. He spent the next seventeen years proclaiming what he called a Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty, a message of divine unity focused on the themes of love, harmony and beauty. He founded what is known today as the Inayati Order, which continues his teachings worldwide.¹

Nobody knows for sure quite where Zarathustra lived or quite when he taught, but his origin may well have been in the Khorezm region of what is now Uzbekistan, near the western end of the great Eurasian steppe.² The region is dry and dusty. The once mighty Amu Darya river, known to the Greeks as the

¹ For more information about Hazrat Inayat Khan and the Inayati Order, please visit <http://inayatiorder.org/>.

² Karim, pp. 201-204.

Oxus, is just a brown trickle. In Zarathustra's time the region was no doubt wetter and more fertile, as the massive Soviet diversions of water for irrigation were far in the future.³ Zarathustra's culture was nomadic and pastoral, and his circumstances seem to have been modest. In one of his hymns, he prays that God will reward him with a mere ten mares, a stallion and a camel.⁴

The natural beauty of the area, less austere then than now, gave him inspiration. Inayat Khan says,

Zarathushtra taught [human beings] to see the beauty of God, and to worship Him by looking at the water, at the sky, at nature. It was wise advice. When we look at the immensity of nature our mind naturally becomes keen, our heart larger, and we begin to see the signs of God there more than in the midst of worldly activity. ... Being face to face with nature gives a feeling of expansion of the heart, and nature causes the soul to awaken.⁵

Zarathustra's awakened soul prompted him to deliver a message to his people.

The First Prophet

Zarathustra is appropriately called the First Prophet. He spoke of themes later to be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: a single universal God, the battle between good and evil, the devil, heaven and hell, and an eventual end to the world. He addressed a people who venerated fire and worshiped the ancestral deities of the Indo-Europeans, a host of gods, demons and spirits. In contrast, he proclaimed some radical ideas:⁶

- There is only one God, not a host of them. God is named Ahura Mazda, roughly "Lord Who Is Wise," and is a god of goodness.
- All the other gods and deities that people worship are merely attributes, partial glimpses, of Ahura Mazda. Evil deities such as the spirits of war, destruction and greed are reflections of humanity's baser tendencies. None of them are to be worshiped.
- The source of goodness in the world is *Asha*, often rendered as "truth", "reality" or "righteousness."
- The source of evil in the world is the Lie (*Druj*), untruth or deception. Later personified as a supernatural being, Angra Mainyu, the concept

³ Wikipedia, "Amu Darya."

⁴ Kriwaczek, p. 212. *The Gathas: The Hymns of Zarathushtra*, 44:18.

⁵ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, p. 78.

⁶ Kriwaczek, p. 213.

seems at first to have been of an abstract principle. *Angra Mainyu* means a mind or mentality (*mainyu*) that is destructive or malign (*angra*).⁷

- Each individual has a free choice between good and evil. Following the path of goodness leads to happiness in this life, and following the path of the Lie leads to destruction. In addition, there will be a happy existence after death for those who follow goodness and an unhappy existence for those who do not.

Zarathustra denounced the practice of animal sacrifice as cruel, opposed the ritual use of the plant *haoma* (the *soma* of the Rig Veda in India), and did not preach the adoration of fire. In other words, he rejected the religion and rituals of his time, and he thereby earned the scorn and hostility of his priests and his ruling princes and warriors. He was denounced, expelled from his community, cut off from his family and clan and forced into exile. He traveled to Balkh, in today's Afghanistan, where he found a warmer reception and became the court priest, living out his days in peace.⁸

We know little about the personality of Zarathustra, but we can surmise that he exhibited the traits that Inayat Khan ascribes to the prophetic temperament:

Not all that the prophet comes to give to the world is given in words, but that which cannot be given in words is given without words. It is given through his atmosphere, it is given by his presence. It is given by the great love that gushes forth from his heart. It is given in his kind glance, and it is given in his benediction. And yet the most is given in silence that no earthly sense can perceive.⁹

Inayat Khan says that the prophet is a messenger:

God speaks to the prophet in His divine tongue, and the prophet in his turn interprets it in the language of [human beings], making it intelligible to them, trying to put the most subtle ideas in the gross terms of worldly language.¹⁰

In the East, the prophet is termed *Payghambar*. ... [The term] literally means 'message-bearer', and this word is used for holy ones who brought a divine message from time to time to a certain community, nation, or race, whenever there was a need of awakening in a certain people.¹¹

Zarathustra, the first prophet, brought the divine message to the people of Khorezm.

⁷ Wikipedia, "Angra Mainyu."

⁸ Kriwaczek, pp. 213-214.

⁹ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Persian Religion After Zarathustra

Zarathustra brought the divine message, but after his death elements of the old religion came creeping back. Deities became more prominent and the use of haoma was reinstated, as was the ancient cult of fire, a tradition that continues to this day. By the sixth century B.C., the religion of Ahura Mazda had become the official state religion of Persia.



Figure 1 – Faravahar, symbol of the state religion of Persia

Interrupted by the defeat of Persia by Alexander of Macedonia (one hesitates to call “Great” such a ruthless megalomaniac), the religion had a resurgence after Alexander’s empire broke apart, but became more and more ossified and rigid, with a proliferation of rules, a complicated set of purity laws and severe persecution of those who failed to obey.¹² After the Arabs took over in the seventh century and Islam became the official religion, the religion of Zarathustra gradually waned, living on today in communities of Parsees (Persians) in India and in scattered places throughout the rest of the world.

So why study it, if it is so obscure? Because some of its foundational concepts are still of great relevance.

Cosmic Order

Consider *Asha*, variously translated as “reality” and “truth.”¹³ According to Dr. Jenny Rose, a professor at Claremont Graduate University, “*Asha* can be translated as ‘order’ or ‘arranged in cosmic cohesion,’ and thus ‘right’ in the sense of ‘as it should be.’”¹⁴ The ancients blurred the distinction between reality, descriptive statements about what reality is, and normative statements about what reality ought to be, but the point is that according to this conception there is an order or cohesion to what is real. If we could discern

¹² Ibid., pp. 217-219.

¹³ Wikipedia, “*Asha*.”

¹⁴ Rose, p. 9.

that order and live in harmony with it, our lives would be good, that is, fulfilled and happy.



Figure 2 – Geometrical symbols in Uzbekistan suggesting an orderly reality

And we can indeed discern that order because it is seen in the biological systems that surround us and in which we live. Inayat Khan says,

Zarathushtra's spiritual attainment began by his communication with nature. He appreciated, adored, and worshiped the sublimity of nature, and he saw wisdom hidden in the whole of creation. ... To those who followed him on the path of spiritual attainment, he showed the different aspects of nature and helped them to see what they could behind it all.

The way of worship taught by Zarathushtra was to worship God by offering homage to nature. For nature suggests to the soul the endless and unlimited being hidden behind it all.¹⁵

Zarathustra recognized and valued the ordered systems of nature, which promote growth and well-being. He says, “He who cherishes Thy Way with the Good Mind is himself a promoter of abundance and prosperity.”¹⁶ Professor Rose comments,

The good thoughts, words and actions of the *ashavan* [one who adheres to Asha] lead to blessings, increase, peace, wholeness and continuity of life for the individual, the community, and the land. In pursuing this course, the *ashavan* is emulating the increase-producing activity of Ahura Mazda, who brings benefits to the highest degree, expressed in the epithet *spento.toma*, ‘most beneficial’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁶ *The Gathas: The Hymns of Zarathushtra*, 49:5.

¹⁷ Rose., p. 17.

The language here is all in what I call the Goodness Paradigm, which evaluates courses of actions in terms of observable benefits and harms rather than adherence to moral rules.¹⁸ Zarathustra embraced what we now call Permaculture: the observation and mimicry of natural systems to create abundance.¹⁹ The ethically good choice, the choice that promotes human flourishing, is to live in harmony with how nature works. Care for the elements—later Zoroastrianism had rules for civic hygiene and against pollution of the waters—prefigures our modern concern with healthy ecology.²⁰

The opposite of this harmony, interestingly, is not disharmony but the Lie (*Druj*), a deception or misrepresentation of reality that renders one incapable of making good choices. Unlike the Vedic morality of India in which the opposite of order is merely its absence, and unlike the Classical Greek belief that it is just ignorance that causes us to make bad choices, the evil portrayed in the earliest Zoroastrian scriptures is a forceful expression of ill will. The *dregvant* (one who adheres to *Druj*) actively chooses evil thoughts, words and actions, perpetuating cruelty, violence, ill-treatment and acts of wrath and oppression.²¹ Lots of things cause harm—natural disasters, wild animals, disease and so forth—but what is truly evil is the deliberate human intention to cause harm. The Lie destroys trust and tears apart the fabric of community. What’s worse, the liar becomes incapable of perceiving and acting on what is truly good, good for him or her as well as everyone else.

Again, the basis of ethics is the observed consequences of one’s actions. The Zoroastrian religion soon enough became full of laws and prohibitions, but the earliest insights are just common sense, couched in the desire of Ahura Mazda for human welfare. The basic principles of conduct are three: good thoughts, good words and good deeds (*humata*, *hukhta* and *hvareshtha*). These are what is good for human beings.²² And, by the way, notice that they start with good thoughts. “As you think, so shall you become” is nothing new.²³

Virtue Ethics

These ethical prescriptions are not laws that regulate the details of human conduct. Instead, they are a form of *virtue ethics*: they emphasize admirable character instead of moral duties or a narrow concern with the consequences of individual actions.²⁴ In this they are more like the Jewish Ten Commandments, the Christian Golden Rule and the Aristotelean virtues of courage, temperance

¹⁸ Meacham, “The Good and the Right.”

¹⁹ Michael, “What Is Permaculture?”

²⁰ Rose, p. 18.

²¹ Idem.

²² Ibid., p. 17.

²³ Bruce Lee. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/381647-as-you-think-so-shall-you-become> as of 22 November 2013.

²⁴ Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics”.

and so forth than they are like Talmudic laws, Jesuit casuistry and Persian codes of purity. Their purpose is to instill habits of character, dispositions to act in certain ways. These dispositions are often called “virtues;” hence the name “virtue ethics”. Unlike, for instance, a rule against eating meat on Fridays or one requiring kosher or halal foods only, the injunction to perform good deeds is much more general. The point is to become the kind of person who does good things as an expression of who he or she is rather than one who merely obeys a set of rules.

There is a parallel here with Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Knighthood of Purity and its rules of spiritual chivalry.²⁵ These rules are forty brief injunctions—things like “Make no false claims” and “Extend your help willingly to those in need”—that students are invited to ponder and try out. Inayat Khan gives them as a spiritual practice. The student recites each one once a day for forty days and then goes on to the next one, a practice that takes a total of 1,600 days or about four and half years. The cumulative effect is to train one’s character to become less egocentric, less quarrelsome and more attuned to what the Sufis call the Spirit of Guidance than it was before undertaking the practice.

Inayat Khan seems to have gotten the inspiration for at least some of his chivalric rules from Zarathustra. Consider the very first rule, “My conscientious self: Make no false claims.” This is an application of the principle of *hukhta*, good speech. No doubt there is more to good speech than refraining from telling lies, but this is a good start. During the 40-day period of recitation one starts to notice not only the occasional temptations to tell overt falsehoods but all the little ways in which the truth can be shaded as well. After a while, one feels a certain distaste for anything but honesty. One does not have to overcome temptation by remembering a moral rule. Instead, the temptation itself becomes weaker.

Cosmology

There are parallels between Zarathustra and Inayat Khan in their world views as well.

The cosmology of Zoroastrianism is a standard dualist view of good versus evil. In the earliest writings, Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, is the source and creator of everything. Angra Mainyu, destructive mentality, is something like a deficiency or perversity that causes the good mentality, Spenta Mainyu, to be deceived. Later, Angra Mainyu is raised to the status of an independent being who is opposed to the Wise Lord; in other words, Satan as opposed to God. There are various theological interpretations of these two beings, disputes about which have unfortunately been the cause of wars and persecutions. Is the Devil an independent being, co-equal with God? Is God the supreme creator

²⁵ See “The Chivalric Rules” at <http://inayatiorder.org/chivalric-rules/>.

and the Devil one of the creatures, albeit a particularly powerful one? In either case, the world we live in is seen as a battleground in which one must choose sides.



Figure 3 – Duality in the desert architecture of modern-day Uzbekistan

But there is another conception, rooted in an ancient mysticism of the steppe: that both Good and Evil, God and the Devil, have their source in unity. According to researcher Tohir Karim of the Tashkent University in Uzbekistan, it is Time (*Zrvana*) that is the underlying or originating force that makes possible both good and evil. To be clear, this concept does not appear in the Zoroastrian scriptures; Karim cites instead the legends and traditions of Khorezm.²⁶ He says

At the basis of all ... is the image of time, the powerful force which organizes the system of objects and events in the material world, provides for the sequence of events, and sets the whole universe in motion. Even the gods are believed to be powerless before time, as the gods, too, are seen as only a product of time as it proceeds. ... [Time] was considered to exist before the material world, outside of nature, and to set nature in motion ... Zrvana (Time) in the course of its progress initially created two spirits. They were not the creators of the universe, but the results of the efforts of the powerful Zrvana.²⁷

There are two ideas of note here: that all is change, and that all is one. Time, the ongoing succession of events, is what makes everything possible. Everything changes from moment to moment. This notion of constant change echoes Heraclitus and prefigures the modern process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. What is ultimately real is not substance, but process. We, the

²⁶ Karim, p. 185-186. The concept of Zrvana or Zurvan was an alternative theology to mainstream Zoroastrianism in the Persian empire of 200-600 AD. Scholars disagree about its origins, but one theory is that the idea is pre-Zoroastrian. (Wikipedia, "Zurvanism.")

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 210-211.

living, are not anomalies in a fundamentally dead universe. We are elaborations of a life that extends down to the tiniest elements.

That Time generates all things also echoes the many strains of mysticism that assert a unity that underlies the plurality of manifestation that we live in every day: the Way of Taoism, the Brahman of Hinduism, the Original Mind of Buddhism, Ralph Waldo Emerson's Oversoul, the *Ein Sof* of Jewish Kabbalah, the Godhood of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, the Gnostic All, and the Only Being of Sufism.

Mystical Unity

Mystical unity is at the core of the Sufi teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan. In numerous places he calls God the "Only Being."²⁸ He says that the recognition of mystical unity, the essential teaching of Sufism, predates the Sufi orders formed within the context of Islam that we know today. He agrees with Karim, saying that it "arose contemporary to the teaching of Zoroaster."²⁹ He calls Sufism "the esoteric side of Zoroastrianism"³⁰ as well as of all the other major religions.

Inayat Khan's cosmology is a form of pantheism:

The whole universe is nothing but particles of God's life and the Absolute is one Being. God therefore is all, and all is God. All comes from God and all returns to God, who is the source and goal of all things.³¹

The Only Being is, in this view, something like a person whose body is all the physical matter of the universe and whose mind is the combined mentality of all that physical matter. This view entails panpsychism, the idea that every element of physical matter has also a mental aspect. Additionally, it entails the notion that the mentality of all the various elements combine to form one mentality, one interior, subjective reality, which we can call the Self. As Inayat Khan puts it, "The infinite God is the Self of God, and all that has been manifested with name and form is the outward aspect of God."³²

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss pantheistic panpsychism in detail; I treat it elsewhere.³³ Here I want to examine just one aspect. Typically the mystics say that both good and evil are aspects or manifestations of the One and that the purpose of being human is to realize our unity with that One. It is

²⁸ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, pp. 89, 257, 259.

²⁹ Khan, "Sufism."

³⁰ Khan, "The Origin of Sufism."

³¹ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, p. 58.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³³ Meacham, *How To Be An Excellent Human*.

a mistake, they say, to get caught up in dualistic struggle as if one side or the other were ultimately real. But if that is the case, why should we favor goodness over evil? If neither is the ultimate reality, why prefer one over the other?

Zarathustra suggests an answer: Because aligning yourself with the good gives you a better chance of experiencing oneness than not. You have to be alive to realize your mystical unity with the All, and it is the good that promotes life, not evil. Evil is ultimately self-destructive. Inayat Khan agrees:

He is not wrong who in his imagination makes God the God of all beauty, free from ugliness; the God of all the best qualities, free from all evil. For by that imagination he is drawn nearer and nearer every moment of his life to that divine ideal which his soul is seeking, and once he has touched divine perfection, he will find in it the fulfillment of his life.³⁴

What is good is analogous to light; and what is bad, or harmful, is analogous to darkness. If you live in darkness, you can't see very well; your strategies are limited because of lack of information. They may be brutally effective for a while, but are ultimately self-defeating. It is more efficacious in the long run to live in the light, and it is much more pleasant as well. Light and dark endlessly alternate, it is true, and the alternation is all part of the whole. If you live in that knowledge, then you are enlightened. If you don't, then turning toward the light will make it more likely that you will come to that realization.

Not everyone may be ready for such a realization, however. Inayat Khan says that each person has his or her own way of understanding.³⁵ What is desirable for a person of a certain grade of evolution may be different for one of a different grade.³⁶ If mysticism does not appeal to you or if you find the religious worldview itself, mystical or not, unlikely, the Zoroastrian ethic still makes abundant sense. Zarathustra espouses what I call the Goodness Ethic,³⁷ which tells us how to live a happy, harmonious life: cultivate good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

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³⁴ Khan, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, p. 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁶ Khan, *In An Eastern Rose Garden*, p. 204.

³⁷ Meacham, "The Goodness Ethic."

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