

Health and healing in the religion of Zarathushtra

The close link between mind and matter - the effect the body has on the mind and vice versa, has been expounded in the teachings of Asho Zarathushtra thousands of years before the concept became acceptable in recent times

By Kersey H. Antia, Orland Park, Illinois¹

In no other religious system do health and healing occupy such a central and integral role as in the religion of Zarathushtra. The human body is regarded as so important a link to the soul, nay, rather as the very counterpart of the the soul in the physical world. A neglect of body and health therefore will retard the progress of the soul. A long and healthy life is always prayed for in our scriptures, and health of the body is prized for the health of the soul as well - the two are inextricably intertwined as in no other religious philosophy. According to our Pahlavi scriptures, Ahura Mazda created the physical world in the image of the spiritual world, and the mission of man and woman on this earth is to bring about Frashokereti (renovation) in this world by eradicating all evils including diseases, ill health and death.

Keeping good health therefore becomes an important religious duty. Indeed one of the attributes of Ahura Mazda is Haurvatat (wholeness, perfect health) and another is Ameretat (immortality), attributes that God wants us to emulate in order to become his hamkar (collaborator). It is not surprising therefore that the Visperad exhorts us to keep our feet, our arms and our intellect in good shape so we can perform all good deeds and fight all evil. One of our most common prayers says:

“A thousand times health unto you. Ten thousand times health unto you.”

Hazangrem baeshezanam Baevare baeshezanam!

When we realize that most other religions of the time, including early Christianity, looked down upon the body as demonic, we can very well appreciate the beauty and originality of Zarathushtra's theology, a theology that is relevant to our modern times.

Taking care of our health in order to serve Him as long, and as well as we can, is as essential a virtue as emulating God's other characteristics, namely, developing Good Mind, attaining Best Righteousness, establishing God's Kingdom on this earth and maintaining a Benevolent Right- mindedness.

¹ First published in *FEZANA JOURNAL* - SPRING 2002, pp. 28-30.

Emphasis on health in our scriptures. Taking care of our health is therefore highly emphasized in our scriptures. Even as they denounce laziness, they emphasize the need for eight hours of sleep. Various research has now proven that sleep is very important for building immunity against various viruses and diseases.

While meat and wine are not prohibited, our scriptures regularly remind us not to overindulge in them. All good things the Good Lord has created is for enabling man and woman to fight against all the evil in the world and root it out altogether, and bring about the Kingdom of God on this earth so that the physical (*geti*) world will merge with the spiritual (*menog*) world ultimately. But such a mission cannot be carried out by us without taking utmost care of our health. In Atash Nyaesh, the body is regarded as a ‘walking friend’ of the soul, which cannot perambulate. As the soul is locked in the body and cannot walk around, it depends on the body to fulfill its wishes. Body is thus an extension of the soul, meant to be a vehicle for Goodness and Righteousness.

The *nahan* prayers represent this notion very well – the cleansing of the body leads to the cleansing of the soul. Also a healthy mind needs a healthy body. “*Man sana in corpore sano*” – as the Latin proverb says. This idea seems reflected in the Bible, which says, “Know ye that ye are the temple of God and the spirit of God resideth in ye.”

This emphasis on health is well reflected in our practices to this day. Every town in Gujarat had a gymnasium or *akhado* (wrestling ground) with an *ustad* (teacher) who was treated with utmost respect for his uncompromising zeal for promoting perfect physical health. There were not only many *pahelvans* of heroic strength in ancient Iran, but up to my own times there were many Parsi gymnasts in Bombay and elsewhere, well-known for their strength.

Such an emphasis on health led to strict hygienic practices, which in times of epidemics resulted in fewer fatalities among the Parsis in Bombay and Gujarat than among other communities. Our funerary practices, disposal of the dead, *bareshtnum* of nine nights etc., are also based on hygienic principles.

Any habit that impairs health such as cigarette smoking, drug usage, over eating or overindulgence of any kind is a thoroughly non-Zarathushti act as it impairs our ability to be our best self and work for Ahura Mazda as hard and as long and as best as we can.

Methods of healing. It was therefore imperative to resort to various methods of healing in order to restore health whenever health was impaired. Ardibehesht Yasht is often cited for describing various methods of healing prevalent in the Avestan period:

- Healing by Asha (righteousness, purity).

- healing by the observance of (religious) laws.
- Healing by *manthras* (prayers, meditation), which is maintained as the best healing of all healings.
- Healing by plants (herbal cure).

Healing by prayer and positive thinking. In our times it is not uncommon to find well-documented individual cases of miraculous cures by positive thinking and prayers. Nowadays major cancer treatment centers emphasize mind-body forms of treatment and regularly conduct research on it. There are many authentic scientific research studies that have conclusively proven the efficacy of prayers and meditation in alleviating the symptoms of many diseases if not completely eradicating them (as mentioned in my article in an earlier *FEZANA Journal*).

A few months ago, American evening TV news found it fit to report nationwide, a study that showed significant improvement in blood pressure etc., simply by praying, chanting or meditating with a rosary.

Over the years, our priests practiced various forms of healing – praying and offering consecrated food or *Haoma* juice, performing jashans for restoring one’s health, giving amulets, prescribing certain prayers such as Ardibehest Yasht, Tandarosti prayers, etc. I found one such amulet in the collection of my grandfather who died in 1917. It has some undecipherable prayers written in Pahlavi on a pure silver plate. Each generation resorted to its own method of healing, as it knew best or as it tried to compete with the burgeoning practices of other faiths in order to hold the laity steadfast to our own faith. Such practices reached their epitome in Achaemenian times when our *magis* (mobeds) imbibed the knowledge of astronomy and astrology from the Babylonians and carried it with them as far as Anatolia - modern Turkey. Our calendar and the fertility cult of Goddess Anahita (*Avan-Ardvisur*) are traced by most scholars to this period. However, in most instances the clergy took pains to ‘Zoroastrianize’ them. Our own generation lives on the threshold of great discoveries about uncanny powers of the positive mind and positive thinking.

In my own clinical practice I often use a particular method for improving the mind-body ratio and functioning, and it has often led to amazing results. It’ll soon be freely available. What our holy prophet taught us about Good Mind as Ahura Mazda’s foremost quality is now echoed in our modern day research findings and medical treatment modalities.

Hail to Asho Zarathushtra!

* * *

Dr. Kersey H. Antia is high priest of the Zarathushti community in the

Chicago area since 1977, when he was awarded the Dastur's shawl by ZAC. A fully-ordained priest from the M. F. Cama Athornan Institute in Mumbai, since 1950, Dr. Antia studied religion and Avesta- Pahlavi under Dastoorji Dabu and other learned priests. Dr. Antia has lectured widely, and is author of numerous papers on the religion and psychology. He is a licensed clinical and management psychologist in full-time private practice in Illinois and is also affiliated with several hospitals.

SPRAYS OF THE BARSOM PLANT

By Ardeshir B. Damania

Davis, California

Soma or Haoma juice is extracted from the twigs of the Ephedra plant, *Ephedra vulgaris* [Rich.] of the Gnetaceae botanical family. The other species of Ephedra plant are *E. sinica* and *E. gerardiana*. It was known not only to the ancient Aryans, but also to the Persians and the Chinese. The latter called it 'Ma Huang'.

Medicinal properties. Its medicinal properties were well known in Ayurvedic and Chinese herbal remedies. It was treasured for treating allergy, asthma, cold, cough, diarrhea, fevers, hay fever, headache, malaria and rheumatism. In fact it was considered as a panacea by many. The medicinal property of this plant is generally attributed to the alkaloid, Ephedrine, which produces central nervous system stimulation, peripheral vasoconstriction and elevation in the blood pressure.

The Ephedra plant is also known to help in maintaining oxygen supply to the brain at high altitudes. This is done by increasing the number of red corpuscles in the blood. People who inhabit high altitude regions in the Himalayas - the Lepchas of Sikkim, the Bhutias from Bhutan and the Sherpas from Nepal - all use this plant to get over altitude sickness and

FEZANA JOURNAL - SPRING 2002



ASSYRIAN RELIEF, COURTESY "MESOPOTAMIA" BY MICHAEL ROAF