

# The Amesha Spentas

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## Introduction

In Zoroastrianism, the Amesha Spentas are a set number of divine aspects, or philosophical abstractions, which constitute the nature of the Divine Wisdom that created existence, Ahura Mazda. Each one represents either a beneficial quality in the mental realm, like progression and conscientiousness, or an attainment that would sustain goodness and wisdom in the material world, such as authority or growth. Most properly, they are counted as 7, a heptad of divine aspects; although, one often encounters the number of 6, with the seventh being Ahura Mazda. As a whole, they are the component pieces of Mazda Ahura, each one existing as an abstraction of the Creator of the universe, individually and distinctly available to all the living.

In the Gathas, the Amesha Spentas are understood as the key facets of Wisdom (*Mazdā*) and, given this, the different qualities which invest Wisdom with its divine nature. They are therefore presented as a comprehensive system for the attainment of the Divine in the individual. Even though the proper name *Amesha Spentas* ('the growthful undying ones') is not present in the Gathas, the name of each one is found repeatedly throughout, and there they are personalized in a somewhat similar manner to Mazda.

Although each Amesha Spenta is covered here as part of the overall system, they will be discussed more conclusively in their individual articles in the 'In-Depth' section.

## The Seven Amesha Spentas

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| 1. Vohu Manah:      | the Good Mind                                     |
| 2. Asha Vahishta:   | the Best Order [of existence]                     |
| 3. Xshathra Vairya: | the Dominion Worth-choosing                       |
| or Vohu Xshathra:   | Good Authority                                    |
| 4. Spenta Armaiti:  | Growthful Right-mindedness                        |
| 5. Haurvatat:       | Wholeness   |
| 6. Ameretat:        | Deathlessness (or Immortality)                    |
| 7. Spenta Mainyu:   | Progressive Mental-Force (or Growthful Mentality) |

## Mazdā and the Amesha Spentas

Firstly, it should be understood that the creator of all existence, Mazda Ahura, exists fully in the realm of mind and potentialities, rather than in the material realm, and it pervades the universe, existing as the highest potential for any action that can be taken, any experience that could be had. It is concurrently the Supreme Intellect which designed and ordered reality and the divine

substrate of existence, available to all life. It is in this way that Ahura Mazda is best described, as the divine or supreme wisdom inherent to existence, both in its whole and in its abstract pieces. As such, for each human, for every living being, it is able to be cultivated and sustained as the ultimate wisdom which allows one to truly understand the workings of the world, attainable by any entity existing in the realm of mind, if they so wish it.

This experience of transcendent wisdom, the kind by which one truly sees the world and hears the sublime voice of the creator, Zarathushtra conceptualized as Mazda Ahura, the 'Divine, Supreme, or Lordly Wisdom'. Due to his own experience of divine revelation, as detailed in [Song 8](#), he knew this connection to the divine was reached only through the progressive growth and improvement of one's mind and being, rather than the simplistic conception of being "chosen by God". Therefore, he systemized this process of wisdom and divinity in two distinct ways: one, a treatise on the concept of wisdom and the subsequent mental aspects which lead to it; the other, a system for emulating and attaining the divine.

In this sense, the Amesha Spentas are a comprehensive philosophical system for becoming like the Divine by attaining the component aspects of the creator of existence. They enable one to understand Ahura Mazda, emulate it for themselves, and sustain the divine in individual pieces of existence. As such, Ahura Mazda is made available for each person to understand and attain.

Let us now review each one in detail.

### **Vohu Manah**

The first Amesha Spenta is Vohu Manah, or the Good Mind. In its totality, it represents the whole of the mind oriented towards the good; it thus comprises all mental faculties: the intellectual and the creative—emotions, feelings, and beliefs. It is a mind that is wholly focused on understanding and actualizing the good. In a sense it can be understood as a state of being, which it is. Although, it is fundamentally an active process, one of seeking to correctly understand a situation or a facet of the world and the ways in which it can be improved. In this way, it can often be understood as an intellectual faculty. However, it goes beyond mere intellectuality, which often can be misled. It is instead an active mind, the way the whole of one's mind is conducted, in its outwards and reflective actions, in all its aspects.

Vohu Manah is usually listed as the first Amesha Spenta because, in order for one to understand and emulate the others, they must first have a mind which is able to conceive of thoughts and actualize what it has understood. Moreover, this mind must be fundamentally rooted in the good, and emergent from it. Any deception, wrongness, or evil would deceive and mislead any thinking being away from truth or true divinity. The Good Mind is also listed first as Ahura Mazda needed a mind, one that was wholly good, in order for the rest to arise.

This concept of the Good Mind, this holistic approach of understanding and actualizing the good, is probably what best epitomes the Zoroastrian: an individual who seeks first to properly understand what is right and true, not based on rules and guidelines, but by envisioning the true nature of the good, dependent on their own ability and the histories of progression and

regression inherent to the context of their day. Such an individual who has understood conclusively the ideal nature of their own self and the world around them has become a true Zoroastrian, an attainer of the Good Mind.

### **Asha Vahishta**

The second Amesha Spenta is Asha, which literally means ‘the Order [of existence]’; it is often called Asha Vahishta, the ‘best Asha’, when listed as an Amesha Spenta. At its core, Asha is the exact way in which the universe has been ordered or set in place. In modern understanding, it is equivalent to the laws of science or the laws of physics. It is frequently referred to as best because, in Zoroastrianism, the laws which govern existence are understood to be wholly good, the best of all good things, and the literal, physical source of everything good. However, it has not been fully actualized throughout the physical existence, and it must be iteratively and progressively unfurled to its full realization. In this sense, Asha is the blueprint given by the creator for the perfect reality. This leads to the true meaning of the Ashem Vohu prayer, that the laws which govern the universe are wholly good and bring true joy to those who seek to see them fulfilled in the world around them.

While it is the order of existence, Asha also operates at smaller, individual levels of reality. It is therefore the source and base by which a person can understand what is good, and it serves as the inspiration for an ideal reality, both holistically and individually. In this sense, it is intrinsically linked with the good mind, because the good mind is built on envisioning how the ideal reality would be ordered according to Asha. When encountered with a situation of stress or distress (or opportunity for improvement), whether it be a dysfunctional family, toxic community, or harmful society, one can use their mind to envision how Asha would ideally order this piece of reality as well as the actions needed to enact this understanding.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Asha is the ideal behind everything in creation, the best order and outcome imaginable. Therefore it is the responsibility of every Zoroastrian is to understand this, to the best of their ability, and actualize this best order and outcome in every decision.

In the individual, Asha also represents righteousness when it serves as the ideal blueprint for one’s actions and conduct. All these ways of understanding Asha are a part of its meaning, and, because of this, it is one of the primary objects of veneration and understanding for Zoroastrians, even outside of the Amesha Spentas. To many Zoroastrians today, it holds a near equal status to Ahura Mazda.

### **Xshathra Vairya**

Xshathra Vairya, the Dominion Worth-choosing, is the third Amesha Spenta, and it can be understood in two distinct yet closely related ways. The first is that of a divine dominion extending across all existence, establishing a wholly equitable society where all are treated fairly, respected, and enabled to reach their full potential. Within this dominion there would be no oppression, destruction, or hate... all life would thrive in growth, freedom, and happiness. This is Xshathra Vairya, the desirable dominion, the governance worth choosing. This dominion

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<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding, while part of the Good Mind, best summarizes the philosophical system Zarathushtra taught called Vanghvi Daena ‘the good envisionment’.

is to be established by people using their Good Minds to understand the best actualization of Asha in a society. As such, the details of it are not set down in an ancient law code but progressively discovered by people dedicated to uncovering the best organization of society, for each and every living creature.

And yet this Amesha Spenta can be understood in a more personal way, as the power or ability of an individual to enact their understanding. This is Vohu Xshathra, the 'Good Authority', and it is the name used in the Gathas (although both terms carry the dual meaning). Most evidently, it is the literal power one holds, their ability to defend themselves, their loved ones, and those in need; it is also the means by which one is able to direct others to enact their will and desires. In another sense, it is the ability of each individual to express and enact their ability. Therefore, Vohu Xshathra represents the ability, confidence, and authoritativeness by which one expresses their unique insight, and it subsequently necessitates that every single living being deserves the capacity and authority to enact their own understanding and have control over their life. In both these ways, Vohu Xshathra is the minute and sustained enactment of Asha in the material world.

### **The Core Triad**

These three Amesha Spentas, Vohu Manah, Asha Vahishta, and Vohu Xshathra, form a core triad. They represent the precise and perfect laws which govern existence, the understanding of them, and their sustainment in the physical world. In the Gathas, they are mentioned the most and form a separate, informal system of their own, each enabling one to understand and enact the blueprint the creator gave to all the living. However, the full system goes even deeper, forming a pyramid of 7 and creating a comprehensive system of attaining the divine and making existence ideal.

### **Spenta Armaiti**

The fourth Amesha Spenta is Armaiti, 'Right-mindedness', often given the epithet of Spenta, meaning 'growthful' or 'progressive'. It is the only distinctly feminine aspect, and holistically it is the natural, mental instinct to do good, to nourish life, and to live a good, healthy existence. As a concept, it represents a mind that is properly ordered and set in place, continually encouraging growth and progression. In a sense, it encompasses our modern understanding of mental health; although, it goes beyond just being healthy, instead emphasizing the necessity that the truly healthy people seek to grow and nourish those around them. In simpler terms, it is that natural instinct to do what's right, regardless of outside opinions, and to be the best that one can be.

Both in the Gathas and in later tradition, Spenta Armaiti is also intrinsically tied with Earth, being seen as the embodiment of Asha in the natural world, in a manner of thought. As such, Armaiti can be understood as akin to the modern-day concept of Mother Earth, and she represents the natural, growthful instinct of the living, breathing world. In this way, it is the rightfully ordered, beneficent, and bountiful living world, consistently inspiring growth, goodness, and beauty. In both these ways, Armaiti is Asha given form, both a natural, healthy, growing mind and a bounteous, life-nourishing, joyful world.

### **Haurvatat and Ameretat**

The next two Amesha Spentas are **Haurvatat**, wholeness, and **Ameretat**, deathlessness. Together, they form a pair of attainments rather than facilities, and they are those two ultimate things that all life is striving for, which exist fully in the embrace of the divine.

Firstly, Haurvatat is the full, holistic actualization of Asha in the individual, society, and ultimately, reality as a whole, ever diversifying as it unfolds the true, complex nature of Asha in a Kaleidoscopic fashion.<sup>2</sup> As to the grand nature of existence, this wholeness is the complete, complex fulfillment of Asha, in every piece and level of existence, for each living being, and in each society and culture. In this way, it is the attainment of the complete realization of Asha, where each person has reached their full potential, and is totally healthy and happy. For the individual, it is that distinct feeling of being completely happy, satisfied, and whole, knowing that they are part of a greater whole.

Ameretat is the highest attainment that has been searched after for time immemorial, immortality. It is truly the ultimate goal of all existence, all life, to be undying. In this way, Ameretat represents the most lofty of divine attainments, a state of deathlessness. However, until all the causes of death, decay, and disordering are identified and eliminated, this will be unachievable in the material world. And yet, it is understood to be achievable when existence has been progressed and brought closer to the nature of Mazdā Ahura, ever ordered according to Asha, ever eliminating the sources of entropy. For existence as a whole, Ameretat thus represents the truly perfected reality (that is, Frashokereti); while, for the individual, it represents the enduring, unending nature of their pursuit of wisdom and goodness and their ultimate attainment on the perfection of existence.

### **Spenta Mainyu**

The seventh and final Amesha Spenta, Spenta Mainyu, is perhaps the most misunderstood and misinterpreted of the bunch, often being conflated with Mazdā Ahura. This is because it is the easiest to confuse, in both its name and its function. However, beyond nearly all the others, understanding its nature is critical to truly understanding the teachings of Zarathushtra and proper Zoroastrian theology. The name Spenta Mainyu literally means ‘the progressive/growthful mental force/impulse’; although functionally it means the potentiality for life to grow as well as the progressive mentality of an individual.

As a force in reality, Spenta Mainyu is the progressive, evolutionary impulse by which life and existence as a whole has reached its current state, and it is, in this way, the functional mechanism by which Ahura Mazdā created (and continues to create) existence. Most fundamentally, it is the ongoing process of iteratively actualizing or unfolding those perfect laws which order existence, Asha. Moreover, it is an impulse that is inherent to reality, as it exists as the potential for Asha to be enacted in the physical world. In this way, Spenta Mainyu is the very

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<sup>2</sup> I am forever indebted to Dina McIntyre for this description and understanding.

instrument by which Mazdā literally created existence, through that life-promoting impulse for life to progress according to the laws which govern the universe.

For the individual, Spenta Mainyu is that intrinsic and ever-present life-growing impulse which stretches out in front of them from the beginning of time to the end of time—representing that grand narrative of progress and growth, consistently presenting them with opportunities to aid in its efforts. In this way, one can adopt it as their own mindset, aiding in continually creating and progressing existence. As such, it is also that progressive mentality by which one is inclined to work towards the progression and perfection of themselves and existence, working against the destruction and decay which harms life.

### **Other Potential Aspects**

This list of 7 constitutes the only divine aspects which are traditionally considered part of the Amesha Spentas. However, as such a designation isn't explicitly mentioned by Zarathushtra, there are a few other faculties which are often mentioned in the Gathas which deserve being discussed. While not considered Amesha Spentas in the later Avesta, they were given the slightly lower designation of Yazata ('sub-deity').

The first is Sraosha, literally 'listening', and it is the human mental faculty by which one listens to Wisdom, both the wisdom in their own mind and their connection to the Creator, the two practically being the same. In this way, it is a metaphor for the experience by which one gets closer to the Divine, that is, by listening to their own wisdom. The second is Ashi, or the reward, and it is the reward one receives for their actions in accord with Asha. In the Gathas, it is only mentioned a few times. Finally, there is Khratu which is both intellect and willpower, although the former is the primary meaning.

### **Conclusion**

While in much later times each Amesha Spenta would be mythologized as distinct entities, each given realms of creation to rule over, in Zarathushtra's understanding they exist solely as the plurality of the divine, each giving a clue as to the true nature of the Creator. As such, Zarathushtra's conception of the Creator is not a lonely or cold one, but an intimately personal and interpersonal one, with many different aspects and ways in which one can connect with it. They all together constitute the whole of the Creator, and, thus, detail its very nature.

In this way, Vohu Manah represents the Mind of the Creator, wholly good and based on goodness. Asha is the very core thread and determiner which defines the Creator. Vohu Xshathra, while it can be understood as the dominion of the Creator, is in totality the sustainment and upholding of its very nature, those component aspects. Armaiti is the natural, instinctual way that the divine is set or constituted, nourishing life and inspiring growth... Haurvatat, the wholeness of its very nature, and Ameretat, the deathlessness of its nature, both attained by the reason of its goodness and divinity. Finally, Spenta Mainyu is the very nature and potential of Ahura Mazda, spread across all existence and stretched across all time, leading to the ultimate perfection of existence and the attainment of the divine by every piece of reality.

The Amesha Spentas, in the pristine Gathic philosophy, is perhaps the greatest system put forth by Zarathushtra, each an individual system unto itself. In its whole, it defines the very nature of Wisdom, both the concept and the Creator, and systemizes the way in which one can become like God. Therefore, this system, perhaps an inherent truth to any who would comprehensively understand reality, was put forth by Zarathushtra in his own unique wording, context, and viewpoint, holistically conceptualizing divinity, creation, and Creator, much in the same way the laws of science were discovered by figures such as Newton, Darwin, or Einstein, each in their own way.