

**DIALOGUE AS DISCOURSE:  
PRIESTS, KINGS AND WOMEN IN  
THE EARLY UPANIṢADS**

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**BRIAN BLACK**

**Dialogue as Discourse: Priests, Kings and Women in the early Upaniṣads**

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a discourse analysis of the early Upaniṣads, focusing primarily on the dialogues. We will pay close attention to character development and the description of social situations. In looking at the dialogues, we will argue that the literary presentation of the philosophical ideas is an integral part of the claims that Upaniṣadic composers were making about reality. Brahmin composers use the dialogue form to explicitly connect particular people, practices and institutions with philosophical ideas. The Upaniṣads establish the proper mode of conduct for four kinds of dialogical situations: lessons taught by a brahmin teacher to a brahmin student; debates between brahmins and other brahmins; discussions between brahmins and kings; and conversations between brahmins and women. These dialogues serve to outline to both brahmins and their dialogical partners, the proper techniques by which individuals discuss philosophy. This thesis is organised into four main sections. Each section also deals with a particular institutional practice through which brahmins discuss religio-philosophical ideas. The discussions between teachers and students are linked to initiation; conversations between brahmins and other brahmins are presented in the form of a debate; discussions between brahmins and kings are connected to the court and the conversations between brahmins and their wives are linked to household. When we look at the Upaniṣads in this way, we can better understand their differences from previous Vedic texts, which primarily concentrate on the sacrifice, and how they thus represent a shift in how knowledge is constituted in early historic India.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>5-7</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION:</b>	<b>8-48</b>
A. Opening Statement	
B. What are the Upaniṣads and which Upaniṣads are the focus of this thesis?	
C. What are the Upaniṣads about? The self, life, death and immortality	
D. The Historical Context of the Upaniṣads	
E. Dialogue as discourse	
F. Character	
G. Social Context	
H. Relation between dialogue and doctrine	
I. Outline of Chapters	
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	<b>49-92</b>
<b>Teachers and students: The emergence of teaching as an object of discourse</b>	
A. Introduction	
B. Śāṇḍilya and the teaching of <i>ātman</i> and <i>brahman</i>	
C. Śāṇḍilya: from ritualist to teacher	
D. Uddālaka Āruṇi and the teaching of <i>tat tvam asi</i>	
E. Uddālaka and Śvetaketu: acting out the <i>upanayana</i>	
F. Indra as the persistent student	
G. Nārada and Sanatkumāra: <i>Ātman</i> more important than the Vedas	
H. Naciketas and the initiation of an Upaniṣadic brahmin	
I. The Taittirīya Upaniṣad and the graduation of a brahmin student	
J. Satyakāma: the beginning of a brahmin hagiography	
K. Conclusion	
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	<b>93-151</b>
<b>Debates between brahmins: The competitive dynamics of the <i>brahmodya</i></b>	
A. Introduction	
B. The <i>brahmodya</i> and the sacrifice	
C. Uddālaka Āruṇi and the <i>brahmodya</i> in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa	
D. Yājñavalkya and the philosophical tournament	
E. Yājñavalkya's interlocutors: the social and political implication of debate	
F. Yājñavalkya and the tactics of debate	
G. Losing face or losing one's head? The trope of head shattering	
H. Upaniṣadic discourse and material wealth	
I. Yājñavalkya and renunciation	
J. The life-story of Yājñavalkya	
K. Conclusion	



**CHAPTER THREE:****Kings who teach brahmins: The political dimensions of Upaniṣadic discourse**

- A. Introduction
- B. *Kṣatriya* authorship
- C. Janaka and Yājñavalkya: Negotiating the brahmin's position in the court
- D. Janaka and Yājñavalkya in the BU
- E. Kings as teachers: Aśvapati teaches a group of brahmin householders
- F. Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu: Instructions for how to seek patronage
- G. Conflicting agendas of how kings should teach brahmins
- H. Ajātaśatru and the political rivalry between Kāśi and Videha
- I. Ajātaśatru: Upaniṣadic knowledge as a political discourse
- J. The battle of the *prāṇas* as a political metaphor
- K. Pravāhaṇa and the teaching of the five fires
- L. Conclusion

**CHAPTER FOUR:****Brahmins and women: Subjectivity and gender construction in the Upaniṣads**

- A. Introduction
- B. Gendering the self: *Ātman* and the male body
- C. The self, virility and immortality
- D. Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma: Competing ideals of male subjectivity
- E. The myth of recovering the authentic female voice
- F. Gārgī: The debating tactics of female philosophers
- G. Women and Gandharvas: The lack of authority for female speakers
- H. Jabālā and indirect speech
- I. Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī: *ātman* versus *strīprājñā*
- J. Conclusion

**CONCLUSION****ABBREVIATIONS****BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the fundamental arguments of this thesis is that philosophy, and academic work in general, is not the result of solitary reflection, but rather is generated and produced through an active engagement with other people. Nowhere have I learned this more profoundly than in the process of researching and writing this thesis. This work has emerged out of the conversations, discussions, debates and arguments I have had with my supervisors, teachers, colleagues, students, friends and family during the past several years.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### A. Opening statement:

The seventh section of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad begins with a dialogue between Nārada and Sanatkumāra. Nārada approaches his teacher and asks for instruction in the typical manner for Upaniṣadic students. Sanatkumāra, however, demands to know what education Nārada has already received before taking him on as his student.

Nārada responds:

I have studied the Ṛgveda, sir, as also the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda, the Ātharvaṇa as the fourth, the corpus of histories and ancient tales as the fifth Veda among the Vedas, ancestral rites, mathematics, soothsaying, the art of locating treasures, the dialogues, the monologues, the science of the gods, the science of the ritual, the science of the spirits, the science of government, the science of heavenly bodies, and the science of serpent beings. All that, sir, I have studied... Here I am, a man who knows all the Vedic formulas but is ignorant of the self [*ātman*].<sup>1</sup>

Nārada's response is illustrative of the interests of a number of individuals throughout the Upaniṣads. He is unhappy with the traditional education that he has already received and recognises that to be truly knowledgeable he must learn about the self (*ātman*). As we will see, the Upaniṣads present several different, and sometimes conflicting teachings about the nature of the self, but throughout the texts the self remains a central concern of the discourse.

The Upaniṣadic orientation towards the self marks a significant shift from previous Vedic literature that centres around the description and meaning of ritual actions. Indeed, this shift has been recognised by both the Indian tradition, as well as by modern scholars, and is exemplified in the traditional Vedānta division of the Vedas into *karmakāṇḍa* and *jñānakāṇḍa*. According to this classification scheme, the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas are considered *karmakāṇḍa* as they are the sections of the

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<sup>1</sup> CU 7.1.1 (Translations of the Upaniṣads from Olivelle 1996).

Veda that deal with the ritual, while the Upaniṣads, as well as the Āraṇyakas, are called *jñānakāṇḍa* as they deal with more philosophical subjects.

Modern readers have also noticed the shift in orientation from the ritual texts to the Upaniṣads. Romila Thapar, for example, describes the emergence of the Upaniṣadic material as a paradigm shift in the constitution of knowledge in ancient India, observing that '[t]he nature of the change was a shift from the acceptance of the Vedas as revealed and as controlled by ritual to the possibility that knowledge could derive from intuition, observation and analysis'.<sup>2</sup> Modern translators of the Upaniṣads, including Deussen, Hume, Radhakrishnan and Olivelle, have all recognised this philosophical orientation of the Upaniṣads, especially discussions relating to the self.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis also addresses knowledge about the self in the Upaniṣads. However, what makes this study different is that it will approach the texts paying close attention to the literary presentation of the ideas. Included in the diverse material contained in the Upaniṣads are a number of stories and dialogues.<sup>4</sup> These sections use narrative to introduce teachings about the self (*ātman*), and related ideas like the bodily winds (*prāṇas*) and the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*). This thesis will demonstrate that these narrative sections are not merely literary ornaments, but are an integral part of the philosophical claims of the texts. In fact, much of what makes the Upaniṣads unique in relation to previous material is not only the philosophical orientation, but also the literary presentation of the texts themselves. The starting point of this thesis is that in

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<sup>2</sup> Thapar 1993: 307.

<sup>3</sup> Deussen, Hume and Radhakrishnan have all focused primarily on the identification with *brahman* as the most fundamental teaching of *ātman*. Olivelle, as well as other more recent scholars like Bodewitz and Brereton, have paid more attention to the diversity of teachings about *ātman*.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis, the word 'dialogue' will be used to refer to conversations in the Upaniṣadic literature between two or more people, much like this word is used to refer to the 'dialogues of Plato'. The use of this word is not intended to invoke the works of philosophers like Gadamer and literary theorists like Bhaktin, who employ this word in technical and idiosyncratic ways.

the Upaniṣads the medium is a fundamental part of the message. Or, as Bakhtin has suggested: 'Form and content in discourse are one'.<sup>5</sup>

Like the dialogues of Plato, philosophical claims are introduced in the form of a conversation, thereby presenting philosophical ideas within the context of specific individuals and social situations. They tell us who is speaking, to whom, where, under what conditions and what is at stake in their discussions. When we pay attention to these details, we will see that the narratives not only contextualise the teachings, but they also characterise the knowledge and outline how and by whom these teachings are practised in the social world. While the teachings emphasise the *ātman*, the dialogues reinforce this focus on the individual by presenting us with specific selves, the literary characters. In this way, the specific characters and how they achieve selfhood are an integral part of the Upaniṣadic discourses about the self: the Upaniṣadic notion of self is not merely a philosophical insight, but a way of being in the world.

### **B. What are the Upaniṣads and which Upaniṣads are the focus of this thesis:**

Before describing the argument and structure of this thesis in more detail, it is useful to clarify what the Upaniṣads are and which specific texts will constitute the source material for this study. The Upaniṣads are ancient texts from India that are traditionally regarded as the fourth and final section of a larger group of texts called the Vedas, which also include the Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas.<sup>6</sup> As Roebuck

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<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin 1981: 259.

<sup>6</sup> Traditionally there are four Vedas or main scholastic traditions that have preserved the Vedic texts. They are the *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. All of the texts that we will be looking at are part of one of the first three Vedas. Although there are literally hundreds of texts that call themselves Upaniṣads, in this study we will concentrate on the early Vedic Upaniṣads. After the Vedic period, a number of devotional texts have referred to themselves as Upaniṣads. The most famous

has pointed out the dates of the Upaniṣads continue to be contested, yet most scholars situate the texts from about 700 until 300 BCE.<sup>7</sup> The primary focus of this thesis will be on the BU, CU, KsU, TU and AU, all of which are considered to be the early Upaniṣads, composed sometime before the time of the Buddha and Mahāvīra. Scholarly consensus assumes that these texts were composed between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>8</sup>

There are several reasons for focusing on these particular Upaniṣads, but the most fundamental distinction of these texts is that they represent the initial shift away from ritual, towards a philosophical orientation. Indeed, a number of scholars have claimed that the early Upaniṣads mark the birth of philosophy in ancient India.<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, problems with this claim, both because the earlier Vedic texts also contain material that could be considered philosophical, as well as the contention that the word ‘philosophy’ itself is not appropriate for the Indian context. Nevertheless, if we use ‘philosophy’ in its general sense, as reasoned discourse that addresses questions concerning the nature of the self, the foundation of life, what happens to the self at the time of death, how one should live one’s life, then the Upaniṣads are both clearly distinct from earlier Vedic material, as well as justifiably called philosophy.

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example is the Bhagavad Gītā (*śrīmadbhagavadgītā upaniṣadaḥ*: 18.78). Also there is a Muslim devotional text composed during the Moghal period called the Allopaniṣad.

<sup>7</sup> Olivelle dates the BU and CU between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE and the TU, AU and KsU between the 6th and 5th centuries. These dates take into consideration recent scholarship that has placed the Buddha’s death at 375-355 BCE (Olivelle 1996: xxxvi).

<sup>8</sup> Importantly, these five early Upaniṣads are composed in the style of prose, as opposed to the post-Buddhist Upaniṣads, which are presented in verse form. The later Upaniṣads represent a further shift in philosophical orientation. Scholarly consensus has dated the Kena, Kaṭha, Īśā and Śvetāśvatara between 300-100 BCE and has regarded these texts as post-Buddhist compositions (Olivelle 1996: xxxvii). It is important to distinguish the early Upaniṣads from these later texts, because a number of important ideas generally assumed to be in the Upaniṣads are only developed in the later texts. Ideas like *saṃsāra*, *mokṣa* and *yoga*, as well as important doctrines like the five *indriyas* are not developed in Upaniṣadic literature until these post-Buddhist texts.

<sup>9</sup> Edgerton, for example, is one of several scholars to make this distinction between the Upaniṣads and previous Vedic texts: ‘The Upaniṣads are the earliest Hindu treatises, other than single hymns or brief passages, which deal with philosophic subjects’ (1965: 28).



Lipner is one of the many scholars who have defended the use of the term 'philosophy' in the Indian context:

If Western and non-Western traditions have different *kinds* of histories of reflective, comprehensive view-making, each defined as the project it is by its own radical contingency, then can we speak of 'philosophy' (which includes the 'philosophy of religion') in some encompassing sense in this regard? I believe that we can, so long as we do not use the term 'philosophy' in some trivially unique sense. If the word is allowed to outstrip its etymology (the so-called Greek love of wisdom) and is taken to refer to a rational, critical and systematic enquiry unto the human condition and /or basic human activities and goals such as true cognition, language and right-living, by means of a sustained attempt to ground this enquiry on experience and argument – and this seems to be more or less its current meaning – then I do not see how we can rule out *a priori* that philosophy can be done and indeed has been done in this sense around the world.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not the endeavor of this thesis to argue that the Upaniṣads constitute philosophy, but rather, using philosophy in its more general sense, the point of this thesis is to look at how the ideas are presented and how the presentation characterises the ideas themselves. These questions bring us back to the importance of the literary presentation of the texts. As we will see, not only are the early Upaniṣads distinct from previous Vedic texts in terms of their subject matter, but also the Upaniṣads are marked by the development of a particular kind of literature: stories about the transmission of knowledge. Thus, the primary focus of this thesis will be the narrative sections of the early Upaniṣads.

In addition to the stories and dialogues we will also be looking closely at some other material, including speculations about the Vedic sacrifice, creation myths, genealogies of teachers and students, magical formulas and procreation rites, insofar as they help contextualise the stories and dialogues. As will become clear, the early Upaniṣads consist of a diverse set of material, much of which either existed

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<sup>10</sup> Lipner 1998: 313. Also see Mohanty 1993: 313-330; Mohanty 1992: 21-25.

independently or formed parts of other texts before being collected in one of the Upaniṣads.

We will also consider sections of the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas, particularly the ŚB and JUB, as they contain some of the initial examples of the kinds of narratives that appear in the Upaniṣads. In addition to their similarity of material, the later portions of these texts are also connected to the Upaniṣads based on how they have been handed down in the oral tradition. In this respect, the Āraṇyakas are especially intertwined with the Upaniṣads, as a number of the early Upaniṣads have been handed down as material entirely embedded within the Āraṇyakas. For example, in the textual tradition of the Ṛgveda, the AU appears within the AĀ.<sup>11</sup> In the school of the Black Yajurveda, the TU consists of a portion of the TĀ.<sup>12</sup> In the White Yajurveda, the Brhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad, as the name suggests, is considered both an Āraṇyaka and an Upaniṣad.

In addition to a connection at the textual level, another common feature of the late Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and early Upaniṣads is a shift in focus onto the meaning of ritual actions, rather than describing how to actually perform the ritual. Throughout these texts the meaning of ritual action is portrayed as esoteric knowledge, often designated by the term '*upaniṣad*'. The Agnirahasya, the name of the tenth book of the ŚB, contains the first use of the term *upaniṣad* in Vedic literature. In this text, which addresses the secret meaning of the *agnicayana* sacrifice, an *upaniṣad* refers to a secret (*rahasya*) instruction.<sup>13</sup> As Olivelle explains, an *upaniṣad* is a teaching that is not transparent, but remains hidden: '[T]he term *upaniṣad* ... came to mean a secret,

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<sup>11</sup> The AU appears as AĀ 2.4-6. Also there are two other sections in the AĀ that are known as Upaniṣads: the Mahaitareya (or Bahvṛcabrāhmaṇa) Upaniṣad (AĀ 2) and the Saṃhitā Upaniṣad (AĀ 3). See Keith (1995: 39-41) for further discussion.

<sup>12</sup> The TU appears as sections 7, 8 and 9 of the TĀ.

<sup>13</sup> ŚB 10.4.5.1.

especially secret knowledge or doctrine'.<sup>14</sup> Brereton further points out that *upaniṣad* means the subordination of one thing to another. An important teaching technique throughout the Upaniṣads is to present different orders of reality in a hierarchical relationship. Accordingly, an *upaniṣad* is a teaching that is at the top of the hierarchy of accepted meanings: 'The purpose of arranging things in such a progression is finally to identify the dominant reality behind an object'.<sup>15</sup> In this way, an *upaniṣad* refers to the true meaning of a discourse, or the teaching that summarises a series of meanings.<sup>16</sup>

The Āraṇyakas also have a number of discourses that are considered secret and equivalent to ritual performance.<sup>17</sup> Keith argues that this knowledge does not replace ritual activity, but rather consists of teachings that are connected to ritual activity:

The Āraṇyaka seems originally to have existed to give secret explanations of the ritual, and to have presupposed that the ritual was still in use and was known. No doubt the tendency was for the secret explanation to grow independent of the ritual until the stage is reached where the Āraṇyaka passes into the Upaniṣad ... But originally an Āraṇyaka must have merely meant a book of instruction to be given in the forest.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, the emphasis on secret or hidden knowledge that is established in the Agnirahasya and the Āraṇyakas continues throughout the early Upaniṣads. Several discourses claim that the gods love what is secret (*paro' kṣakāmā hi devāḥ*).<sup>19</sup> Also, the word *upaniṣad* is equated with the real behind the real (*satyasya satyam*).<sup>20</sup> Like the latter sections of the Brāhmaṇas and the Āraṇyakas, the Upaniṣads privilege knowledge over ritual action. The CU states that only what is performed with

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<sup>14</sup> Olivelle 1996: liii.

<sup>15</sup> Brereton 1990: 124-5.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in one passage it refers to the fundamental meaning of the *yajus*: 'But indeed, this *upaniṣad* is the essence of this *yajus*' (ŚB 10.3.5.12). It is also used in this sense when speech is described as the *upaniṣad* of the *agnicayana* (ŚB 10.5.1.1).

<sup>17</sup> There are four extant Āraṇyakas: AĀ, TĀ, SĀ and the BU.

<sup>18</sup> Keith 1995: 15-6. This interpretation is also supported by Gonda (1975: 423).

<sup>19</sup> ŚB 6.1.1.1-15; BU 4.2.2; AU 1.3.14.

<sup>20</sup> BU 2.1.20. Also see Olivelle's note (1996: 303 n.).

knowledge and awareness of the hidden connections (*upaniṣads*) becomes truly potent.<sup>21</sup>

### C. What are the dialogues about? The self, life, death and immortality:

As we have mentioned, the Upaniṣads are composite texts that contain divergent and sometimes conflicting material. In this thesis we will focus primarily on the teachings that are highlighted by the dialogues, and those that are generally characterised as new in relation to Vedic ritualism. Among these teachings there are a number of interrelated ideas that concentrate on the self, the processes of life and death, and how to achieve immortality.

*Ātman*, the religio-philosophical idea that is discussed most in the dialogues, has a number of different meanings and usages in Vedic literature. Originally, in the earliest Vedic material, *ātman* was a reflexive pronoun meaning 'self'. By the time of the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, *ātman* was associated with a wide range of meanings including body, soul or even refer to the ontological principle underlying all reality. Although there are a number of distinct and contradicting definitions of *ātman*, throughout the Upaniṣads, discourses about *ātman* indicate a general interest in the human body and the processes of life and death.

Discussions about the human body in ancient Indian literature, however, are by no means new to the Upaniṣads. One of the most prevailing mythological explanations of the Vedic ritual texts is that the universe began with the sacrifice and dismemberment of the primordial male body. In the Puruṣasūkta hymn of the Ṛgveda, the body of Puruṣa is dissected and the elements of his body are reassembled to create an ordered universe. Thus, the initial body of Puruṣa is considered imperfect or

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<sup>21</sup> CU 1.1.10.

incomplete, and only when his body is reassembled does creation really begin. In the Brāhmaṇas, the mythology of Puruṣa becomes extended to Prajāpati.<sup>22</sup> Like Puruṣa, Prajāpati creates the world from his own corporality and his creation is considered incomplete. For example, creatures are created without breath, they suffer from hunger or lack of food, they are without firm foundation or they are without name or form.<sup>23</sup> As in the Puruṣasūkta, creation is imagined in terms of restoring and reordering rather than making something from nothing.<sup>24</sup> One of the functions of the Vedic sacrifice was to complete the creation process begun by Prajāpati. Importantly, throughout this mythology not only is the universe made from a primordial male body, but also the universe shares both Puruṣa and Prajāpati the same fundamental structure, thus pointing to a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm.

In some passages in the Upaniṣads, *ātman* assumes the character of the cosmic bodies of Puruṣa and Prajāpati. The AU, for example, begins with a creation myth in which *ātman* creates the universe from the body of Puruṣa.<sup>25</sup> Like with Puruṣa and Prajāpati, *ātman*'s creation is incomplete without a sacrifice. The gods reject both a cow and a horse as inadequate sacrificial victims. Finally *ātman* offers a *puruṣa*, a human, and the gods are pleased. The result of this sacrifice is that the original creation folds back on itself. Originally, *ātman* created fire from speech and speech from the mouth of Puruṣa. Now, after the sacrifice, fire returns to speech and enters the mouth. Like Puruṣa and Prajāpati, *ātman* becomes a creator god who creates the universe by means of sacrificing, dismembering and reconstructing a body.

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<sup>22</sup> For example: ŚB 6.1.1.8; ŚB 7.4.1.1.5. For further discussion see Gonda (1986).

<sup>23</sup> Smith (1989: 58) cites these examples from JB 1.1.11; TB 1.1.3.5; PB 8.8.4, 6.7.18; TB 1.7.1.4; PB 24.1.2.

<sup>24</sup> ŚB 10.4.2.3.

<sup>25</sup> AU 1.1. Brereton explains that creation myths like this one are not meant to recount the actual process of creation, but rather to establish 'the connections that now exist within the world' (1990: 120).

Although in this passage *ātman* assumes the mythology of Puruṣa and Prajāpati, most of the discourses concerning *ātman* represent a different set of concerns than those found in the ritual discourse. Rather than assume a correspondence between the human body and the universe, the Upaniṣads show an interest in the fundamental essence of life. As Brereton explains: ‘While the Brāhmaṇas sought ... correlations within the domains of the ritual and outside world, the Upaniṣads search primarily for those that exist within and among the human and natural domains’.<sup>26</sup> Several sections describe *ātman* as a life force or something that keeps the body alive. For example, the AĀ describes *ātman* as taking different forms in different living beings.<sup>27</sup> In plants and trees *ātman* is equated with sap, while in animals *ātman* is consciousness. In humans, however, *ātman* is said to be clearer than in other beings. In the CU Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches that *ātman* is the fundamental life-force in all living beings.<sup>28</sup>

Closely related to these discussions about *ātman* are discourses about *prāṇa*. The TU, for example, describes the *ātman* as consisting of *prāṇa*, while in the BU King Ajātaśatru teaches that the *ātman* and the *prāṇas* have an interdependent relationship.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, these teachings explain that the *ātman*, as a living organism, cannot exist without *prāṇa*. Most generally, *prāṇa* refers to breath and can mean both exhalation and life-breath.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, the composers of the Upaniṣads did not associate the life breaths of the human body with the lungs. Rather, the breaths are usually described in terms of how they move within the body and where they operate

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<sup>26</sup> Brereton (1990: 119).

<sup>27</sup> AĀ 2.3.2.

<sup>28</sup> CU 6.1.1-6.16.3.

<sup>29</sup> TU 2.2.1; BU 2.1.20.

<sup>30</sup> Bodewitz 1973: 22.

within the body.<sup>31</sup> For example, the BU describes the *prāṇas* as the essence of the bodily parts and articulates the close connection between the breaths and the material body: ‘Any part of the body from which breath departs is sure to whither, for it is the very essence of the bodily parts’.<sup>32</sup> In another passage the KsU associates life with *prāṇa* and states that as long as *prāṇa* remains within the body, the body remains alive.<sup>33</sup>

In the AĀ, we see one of the earliest appearances of a recurring myth about the competition among *prāṇa* and the other vital functions.<sup>34</sup> There are a number of variations of this myth, which appear several times in the early Upaniṣads.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the variation, however, the events in the story are always the same. All the vital functions agree to leave the body to discover which one of them is most central to keeping the body alive. As they leave one by one, the body continues to have life. Only when *prāṇa* departs does the body die. Then, when *prāṇa* returns again the body is restored to life.

These discussions of *ātman* and *prāṇa* are not merely indicative of a general interest in bodily functions, but these discussions are closely connected with the Upaniṣadic goal of immortality. These discussions assume that knowledge of how the

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<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to define *prāṇa* because it means different things in different contexts. The plural, *prāṇāḥ*, refers to either the bodily winds (*prāṇa*, *apāna*, *udāna*, *viṣāṇa* and *samāna*) or to the five vital functions (*prāṇa*, *caṁsus*, *śrotam*, *vāc* and *manas*). Although these distinctly different categories of bodily winds and vital functions are both called *prāṇā*, the singular form, *prāṇa*, retains its connection to breath in both groups. The BU explains that because the *prāṇa* is superior, the other vital functions take on the name collectively (BU 1.5.21). The exact meanings of these terms continues to be contested among scholars. Olivelle translates them as breathing out (*prāṇa*), breathing in (*apāna*), breathing that moves up (*udāna*), the breath that traverses (*vyāna*), and the breath that equalizes (*samāna*). Bodewitz explains succinctly that sometimes the *prāṇas* are the breaths and sometimes they are the senses, the power behind the senses or even the organs of sense. For a detailed account of the semantic range of *prāṇa* from the Ṛgveda to the Upaniṣads, see Ewing (1901). Also see Zysk (1993).

<sup>32</sup> BU 1.3.19.

<sup>33</sup> KsU 3.2.

<sup>34</sup> AĀ 2.1.4.

<sup>35</sup> Sometimes it is a competition between *prāṇa* and the life-breaths, while at other times it is a contest between *prāṇa* and the vital functions. On one occasion, the *prāṇās* are linked to deities (*devas*) (KsU 2.13).

body works and what is responsible for life can contribute to keeping the body alive and averting death. Accordingly, *ātman* and *prāṇa* are often discussed in relation to sleep and death. The Agnirahasya describes how the *prāṇas*, during sleep, take possession of the *ātman* and descend into the cavity of the heart.<sup>36</sup> In the CU, Raikva teaches that when a man sleeps, all the vital functions pass into the *prāṇa*.<sup>37</sup> The union of the *prāṇas* in the interior of the body explains why a man who is asleep is unaware of what goes on around him. The ŚB warns that someone who is in this state of deep sleep should not be woken.<sup>38</sup> In this passage, as well as others, the process of sleeping is likened to the process of dying.

Death is generally described as the departure of *prāṇas* from the body. In the BU, Yājñavalkya teaches King Janaka that death occurs when *prāṇa* leaves the *ātman*, describing death as the consequence of *ātman* seizing the *prāṇa*.<sup>39</sup> The similarity between sleeping and dying is that the *ātman* and/or *prāṇa* retreat into the cavity of the heart and the person loses all consciousness of the outside world. The CU describes these two processes together: in the state of sleep a man slips into his veins and ‘no evil thing can touch him’.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, a dying man is described as slipping into unconsciousness and unable to recognise his relatives.<sup>41</sup> This passage ends by stating that knowledge of these processes effects what happens after death: ‘The door to yonder world is open to those who have knowledge but closed to those who do not’.<sup>42</sup> Thus, when a man knows the connection between the *prāṇas*, he is joined with death and becomes immortal. In another example, Śāṇḍilya teaches that a person obtains

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<sup>36</sup> ŚB 10.5.7.14. The CU also describes the *prāṇas* as resting within the heart (CU 3.12.4).

<sup>37</sup> CU 4.3.3.

<sup>38</sup> ŚB 10.5.2.14.

<sup>39</sup> BU 4.3.38; BU 4.4.1.

<sup>40</sup> CU 8.6.3.

<sup>41</sup> CU 8.6.4.

<sup>42</sup> CU 8.6.5.



*ātman* during death, indicating that a person's knowledge is connected to what happens to them when they die.<sup>43</sup>

Some teachings claim to give the power to overcome death, or at least prolong one's lifespan. In the CU, Mahidāsa Aitareya claims that he will overcome death because of his knowledge.<sup>44</sup> The text then states that he lived to be one hundred and sixteen and that anyone who knows this discourse will also be able to live to the same advanced age. Also, the CU claims that knowledge of *ātman* guarantees a smooth passage into the next world.<sup>45</sup> In these teachings there is an emphasis on the psycho-physical details of death: what happens to the *prāṇas* and exactly where the *ātman* departs.

Of course, the quest to avoid death and secure immortality is also prevalent throughout the ritual texts. What is different, however, is the way in which knowledge about *prāṇa* and *ātman* lead to immortality. In the Prajāpati myth, immortality is gained through ritual action. The sacrifice feeds the gods and ancestors, and thus it is through sacrifice that they remain alive in the heavenly world. In these discussions, about *ātman* and *prāṇa*, however, immortality is gained through manipulation of the life process. To know *ātman* is to understand how the *prāṇas* work and how *ātman* leaves the body at the time of death. As the AĀ explains, knowledge of *ātman* as that which is reborn leads to immortality.<sup>46</sup>

As we will see, Yājñavalkya teaches that immortality can be secured through knowledge alone. However, most Upaniṣadic teachers assume the earlier Vedic notion that immortality can only be achieved through having male children. The difference is that in the ritual texts male children are important because they inherit ritual

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<sup>43</sup> ŚB 10.6.3.11.

<sup>44</sup> CU 3.16.7.

<sup>45</sup> CU 8.4.

<sup>46</sup> AĀ 2.5.

knowledge and continue to feed and keep alive their deceased ancestors. In the early Upaniṣads, however, the desire for male offspring is linked to the understanding of *ātman* as a life-force. A man must have children in order to pass on his knowledge of *ātman*. Thus, it is through having male children that the *ātman* passes from one body to the next. In the AU, Vāmadeva teaches that *ātman* has three births: inception, birth and death and rebirth.<sup>47</sup> As *ātman* is understood as generating life, these passages explain how the *ātman* is passed from one body to give life to another body. The AU, as well as the early Upaniṣads in general, considers *ātman* in terms of a specifically male body and describes sexual activity as the male passing the *ātman* to the female. In Vāmadeva's teaching the female body is basically a receptacle for the *ātman* to be reborn in another male body:

At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. This radiance gathered from all the bodily parts he bears in himself (*ātman*) as himself (*ātman*). And when a man deposits it in a woman, he gives birth to it. That is his first birth. It becomes one with the woman's body (*ātman*), as if it were a part of her own body. As a result, it does not harm her. And she nourishes this self (*ātman*) of his that has entered her.<sup>48</sup>

We will consider the gender implications of this presentation of *ātman* in the fourth chapter. For now, however, it is important to point out that ideas about the self are related to the processes of life and death, and the quest for immortality. The connection between immortality and progeny is crucial because it implies from the outset that access to immortality is limited to men who are married and have children. Although *ātman* is sometimes defined as a universal life-force that is present in all living beings, knowledge of *ātman*, and consequently the ability to secure immortality through *ātman*, is limited to very few. As we will see, the dialogues define for whom this knowledge is available and outline practices they must perform to attain this knowledge.

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<sup>47</sup> AU 2.1-6.

<sup>48</sup> AU 2.1-2.

#### **D. The historical context of the Upaniṣads:**

The changes in the presentation of Vedic literature, as well as the new orientation towards the individual and processes of life and death, are related to political and social changes that were taking place in ancient India. Several scholars have suggested that the Upaniṣads were composed during a time of dynamic change in north India. Both the textual and archeological evidence point to important social and economic developments like increasing sedentarisation, a spread in agriculture, an emergence of a mercantile economy, craft specialisation and increased urbanisation.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, several scholars have argued that the Upaniṣads reflect these political and social changes. That the dialogues take place in Videha and Kāśī, both of which became prosperous cities by the time of early Buddhism, has been taken to indicate a process of urbanisation. Also, the diversity of geographical locations known to the participants in Upaniṣadic discussions suggests that travel and trade were already extensive. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is no conclusive evidence that these particular social changes were taking place. The mere mention of names of cities does not necessarily imply urbanisation and the diversity of geographical locations does not establish anything concrete about trade or commerce. Admittedly, the early Upaniṣads certainly seem to fit this picture of radical social change, but it is not the aim of this thesis to conclusively anchor the texts to these general historical changes.

Nevertheless, there are a number of more specific changes that are directly reflected in the early Upaniṣads. These are: a shift in geographical orientation, changing attitudes about the sacrifice and changing definitions about the status of brahmins. Whether or not these issues reflect a material reality or not, and there is no

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<sup>49</sup> Thapar 1984; 1993; Sharma 1983; Olivelle 1992.

reason to doubt that they do, we can say for certain that these are fundamental issues in the texts and that the philosophical ideas are defined in the context of these changes at a textual level.

Unlike the earlier Vedic material, which is set in the western Kuru-Pañcāla area, the central locations of the Upaniṣads are the eastern cities of Videha and Kāśī. The Upaniṣads still regard Kuru-Pañcāla as the Vedic heartland, but the eastern locations are where most of the action takes place and they are often presented as superior to the more orthodox western regions. The emergence of the east as an important centre of Vedic culture is indicated by an often cited passage in the ŚB, which recounts the story of King Videgha Māthava and his priest Gotama Rāhūgaṇa and their move with Agni Vaiśvānara from Pañcāla to Kosala.<sup>50</sup> Both Agni Vaiśvānara and Gotama Rāhūgaṇa are important figures in the Ṛgveda, and their appearance as part of this legend links the newly emerging cultural centre of Kosala with the traditions of the oldest Brahmanical text. Witzel further characterises their symbolic role as linking the Videha dynasty with the ‘sacred time’ of the Ṛgveda.<sup>51</sup> In this way, the arrival of Agni Vaiśvānara and the sacrifice is presented as a civilising process: before their arrival the eastern region is described as uncultivated and marshy, whereas due to the brahmins bringing sacrifice it becomes ‘sweetened’.<sup>52</sup> Importantly, this passage also suggests that the emergence of the east as a cultural centre was not due to a large-scale aryan migration, but rather represents the movement of specific schools of brahmins who sought to align themselves with newly emerging political leaders.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ŚB 1.4.1.14-17. Witzel refers to this legend as an origin myth for the Videha kings. In this respect it is significant that Agni Vaiśvānara, which means Agni of all the people, is the same Agni which is invoked in the very first hymn of the Ṛgveda.

<sup>51</sup> Witzel 1997: 311.

<sup>52</sup> Witzel 1997: 311.

<sup>53</sup> Witzel explains: ‘... this is *not* a legend of the Indo-Aryan settlement of the east ... but it is a tale of Sanskritization, of the arrival of Vedic (Kuru-Pañcāla) orthopraxy in the east’. (1997: 311).

While tribal leaders in the east could offer brahmins new opportunities for patronage and employment, the brahmins could give aspiring kings legitimacy through ritual.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, it was in the east where there emerged the first larger and more centralised states. The final portions of the Brāhmaṇas, which give the most importance to royal rituals like the *aśvamedha* and *rājasūya*, were composed in the eastern regions of Videha and Kosala. This shift in the focus of the texts indicates that eastern kings not only appropriated Brāhmaṇical texts and practices, but also initiated a number of changes for the sake of establishing political power.

That Vedic culture had been imported to the east and that ascending cultural centres like Videha and Kāśī were in competition with Kuru-Pañcāla is reflected on numerous occasions in the Upaniṣadic narratives. In the BU, King Janaka of Videha stages a competition between his own court priest, Yājñavalkya, and several brahmins from Kuru-Pañcāla. As we will explore further in Chapter Two, this competition is not merely about contesting philosophical points of view, but represents a political and regional rivalry between Janaka, as an eastern king gaining power and authority, and established leaders from the west. Janaka uses the assembly of Kuru-Pancala brahmins as a way of linking his power with the prestige of the ancient Brahminical tradition. Accordingly, the shift eastwards can be seen as a process of appropriation in which tribal elites from the east were both attempting to model themselves after the legendary rulers from the west, as well as to manipulate Vedic texts and practices for their own purposes, inevitably contributing their own ideas and practices in the process.

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<sup>54</sup> Witzel shows that textual composers who moved east, especially the Aitareyans, incorporated various tribes of the east into older Vedic legend. These tribes, many of whom had no historical connection with the *kṣatriyas* of the west, adopted Brāhmaṇical texts and practices as a means of competing with each other.

One of the most important changes to the textual material is an attempt to establish a complete canon. As Witzel explains: ‘It is thus in these eastern territories of Northern India that a thorough re-organization of the brāhmaṇa style texts were carried out (ŚB), including a rethinking of many of the earlier YV “theological positions”’.<sup>55</sup> One of the indications of this is that the same material is organised differently by different groups. Also, the textual innovations in the east, are represented in the hybrid nature of many of the texts. According to Witzel, the various ruptures and breaks that are present in the Vedic texts represent a social situation in which texts were changing hands and employed for different purposes. The Vedic schools needed to periodically organise their canon in able to survive in the competitive business of performing sacrifices and gaining patronage. That Janaka invites a number of noted textual composers to his court perhaps represents this process.

The re-organisation of Vedic material in the east is also reflected in the composition of the early Upaniṣads. As we will see, a number of characters in the narratives introduce their teachings as new. However, on many occasions the teachings that are ascribed to them in the narrative are actually doctrines that had appeared in previous Vedic material. Bodewitz, for example, points out that much of the material spoken by *kṣatriya* characters that is presented as new to the Brahminical tradition appears in older sections of the JB and ŚB.<sup>56</sup> This is an important point because it shows that often what is new about Upaniṣadic discourse is not the doctrines themselves, but rather how they are presented. As such, what is particularly innovative about teachings of *ātman*, *prāṇa* and the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*) is that they appear as teachings of specific individuals. When we consider this change in the literature in

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<sup>55</sup> Witzel 1997: 328.

<sup>56</sup> For example, King Pravāhaṇa’s teaching of the five fires which appears in both the BU (6.2.8) and the CU (5.3.7), appears in the JB (1.4.5), but without a frame dialogue (Bodewitz 1974: 216).

the context of the movement from west to east, we can see the narratives as attempts by brahmin composers to make older Vedic material seem relevant to a new audience.<sup>57</sup>

Another important social change reflected in the Upaniṣads is a movement away from the practice of sacrifice. Scholars remain in disagreement about the fate of the sacrifice in ancient India. Romila Thapar has argued strongly that the Vedic sacrifice became too much of an economic strain and that the sacrifice went into decline, describing the process of burning excess wealth as a 'prestige economy' which restricted Vedic societies to remain in a prolonged state of 'arrested development'.<sup>58</sup> She maintains that because the sacrifice was the central institution and practice in defining social relations, that its demise radically opened up new ways for defining social relations, especially political relations: 'The discontinuance of the Vedic sacrificial ritual would break the nexus between the *brāhmaṇa* and the *kṣatriya* and would provide a new role for the *kṣatriya*, more in consonance with the broader changes of the time'.<sup>59</sup> Thapar concludes that both the Upaniṣads and the rise of Buddhism reflect this decline of the sacrifice, as well as the emergence of new practices and institutions. However, it is far from clear that the sacrifice went through the radical decline that Thapar portrays. If the sacrifice had already ceased in its importance, then why did the early Buddhist texts criticise it so strongly?<sup>60</sup> It is also important to point out that later texts like the Mahābhārata and Dharmaśāstras indicate that sacrifice continued to be important long after the time of the composition of the

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<sup>57</sup> For this point I would like to thank my supervisor Ted Proferes. As he has explained to me, the innovative aspect of the Upaniṣads represents as much of an editorial moment as a philosophical moment.

<sup>58</sup> Thapar 1984: 66.

<sup>59</sup> Thapar 1994: 318.

<sup>60</sup> The Kūṭadanta Sutta, for example describes the excess violence of sacrifice in vivid detail. Also the Aśokan inscriptions show that the Buddhist king effectively outlawed the practice of sacrifice throughout the Mauryan empire (First Major Rock Edict). See Thapar 1984: 97; Fitzgerald 2004: 114-123.

Upaniṣads and the early Buddhist texts. Nevertheless, whether or not the sacrifice ceased to be practised by eastern kings, it is significant that the early Upaniṣads show a radical re-interpretation of sacrifice. Although the sacrifice is not rejected completely, it is not as centrally important in the Upaniṣads as compared to earlier Vedic texts. The sacrifice is not centrally important in the Upaniṣads in the way that it was in earlier Vedic texts. Thapar rightly points out: 'The earlier texts emphasize the centrality of the sacrificial ritual, whereas the new ideologies move away from this and explore alternative eschatologies with, initially at least, an absence of ritual'.<sup>61</sup> Of course, there remain many passages that assume the sacrificial context, yet a number of sections, especially the narratives, are severely critical of the sacrifice. In this way, one of the most innovative aspects of the narratives and dialogues is that they focus on a different set of practices, all of which are defined often explicitly in contradistinction to sacrifice. The four most important of these practice, teaching, debating, advising the king and controlling procreation, will be the focus of this thesis.

Connected to the move away from the practice of sacrifice is the redefinition the status of brahmin. In the earlier Vedic texts brahmins are defined by their participation in ritual and the status of brahmin is established through family lines. As we will see, a number of dialogues are critical of those who are only brahmin by birth and those brahmins who continue to perform sacrifices. The Upaniṣads show us a number of non-traditional brahmins who earn their status through learning specific teachings and engaging in a different set of practices. In other words, the Upaniṣads both criticise the old rules for achieving the status of brahmin and establish new rules for becoming a brahmin. One of the central arguments of this thesis is that through narrative the Upaniṣads actively portray new representations for what it means to be a

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<sup>61</sup> Thapar 1994: 306.



brahmin and that the attainment of selfhood is closely connected to this new ideal of the brahmin.

#### **E. Dialogue as discourse:**

Now that we have briefly outlined the texts, ideas and contexts, let us return to the central arguments of this thesis. As pointed out above, previous scholars have already acknowledged the shift in focus from ritualism to the self. But, for whom are these teachings about the self available? How does one pursue this knowledge? This thesis maintains that the stories and dialogues that often introduce discussions about the self are integral to understanding the teachings about the self. Whereas the doctrinal sections address the ontological status of the *ātman*, the narratives teach how to achieve this status. In this way, the stories and dialogues define both which individuals can attain knowledge of *ātman*, as well as situate knowledge about *ātman* in specific social situations. As we will see, the Upaniṣadic narratives present knowledge of *ātman* as largely restricted to brahmins, and the social situations where *ātman* is discussed are fundamental events in establishing an identity within the brahmin community.

Additionally, the Upaniṣadic narratives address the brahmins' dialogical partners. In order for brahmins to achieve their goals in this world and the next, they have to enter into dialogical relationships with others. The two groups of people whose participation is necessary both for brahmins to earn wealth and status in this world and immortality in the next are kings and women. Kings are important because they are the brahmin's employers. Kings reinforce the authority of brahmins and even give them a political importance. Women are necessary for brahmins primarily as wives and childbearers. They are represented and defined in ways to ensure that their role in

reproduction will produce male offspring, which is considered necessary for the immortality of brahmin men. Importantly, for both kings and women to participate as dialogical partners, there are aspects of Upaniṣadic discourse that they are expected to know. Thus, in addition to brahmins, kings and women also have access to Upaniṣadic knowledge, however the extent of their participation is quite different from each other. Kings are presented as knowledgeable in Upaniṣadic learning with access to immortality. Women, however, although their presence is necessary, only have restricted and indirect access to the Upaniṣadic goals of self and immortality. As we will see, in the dialogues with both kings and women, brahmins model their relationships in ways that reinforce their superiority as brahmins.

This thesis will explore these social dimensions of Upaniṣadic discourse by identifying four different types of dialogues. All the dialogues in the Upaniṣads feature at least one brahmin, but what distinguishes the different types of dialogues from each other is the brahmins' different dialogical partners. The four different types of dialogues are discussions between: 1) brahmins and students 2) brahmins and other brahmins 3) brahmins and kings 4) brahmins and women. These four distinct categories of dialogue illustrate that as the dialogical partners change, so do the dynamics between individuals, as well as the practices that accompany the discussion and what is at stake for brahmins. This thesis will show that the brahmins say and do different things according to whom they are speaking. Additionally, these four types of dialogues represent four different social situations, all of which are fundamental to forming the identity of brahmins. The first category represents education and how one joins the brahmin community. The second type of dialogue features debate and addresses how brahmins establish their reputation and their relative hierarchy among each other. The discussions between brahmins and kings are about patronage and how

brahmins earn wealth, accommodation and even political power. The fourth category addresses how brahmins set up a household and secure immortality through progeny. Importantly, all of these different social situations represent fundamental aspects of a brahmin's life.

We will explore these different categories of dialogue and how they represent fundamental aspects of the lives of brahmins and their dialogical partners through looking at three components of the narratives: character, social context and the relationship between the dialogues and the teaching. In respect to the characters, we will be asking the following questions: How are individual characters represented? What do they do? How do they interact with each other? How are they represented differently in different texts? Concerning the social situations we will examine: Where and in what situations do these dialogues take place? What is the structure of the scene? What kinds of situations are represented? What modes of address and conduct accompany different situations? With regard to both the individual characters and the social situations we will be questioning the link between the frame story and the teaching: What is the correspondence between characters and what they say? What is the relationship between the ideas and the social situation in which they are presented? How is the knowledge characterised?

#### **F. Character:**

This thesis is by no means the first study to focus on the characters or dialogues of the Upaniṣads. In fact, we will engage with the work of several other scholars throughout the four main chapters. A number of studies will be of particular importance throughout this thesis: Helfer's portrayal of the dialogue between Naciketas and Yama as an initiation ritual; Fišer's analysis of the development of Yājñavalkya's character

from the early sections of the ŚB to the BU; Grinspon's argument that here is a hidden *vidyā* in the third section of the BU; Bodewitz's discussions about the dialogues between priests and kings; and Findly's article on the innovative qualities of Gārgī's discourse in her debate with Yājñavalkya.<sup>62</sup> These studies, as well as others that have focused on a particular character or a particular dialogue, have made important contributions to our understanding of the Upaniṣads. What makes this study different from previous investigations of this kind is that this thesis will demonstrate that there are common characteristics among the dialogues and that when we examine these common characteristic together, they comprise a consistent set of teachings that are integral to understanding ideas like *ātman*, *prāṇa* and immortality.

One of the best studies to date in illustrating how the portrayal of character contributes to the philosophical position of the texts is Patrick Olivelle's article on Śvetaketu.<sup>63</sup> His work is an important moment in the history of Upaniṣadic interpretation because Olivelle moves away from the classical philological approach that looks for an authentic doctrine or an original text. Olivelle examines the story of Śvetaketu, which occurs in three different Upaniṣads, noticing that the three versions develop the character of Śvetaketu differently. He argues that the difference in presentation is deliberate and that each version has its own narrative logic. The additions, substitutions and modifications can be seen as part of the narrative strategies of the respective authors or editors.

Other scholars have also commented on the difference between these three versions. Söhnen, for example, following a traditional philological approach, attempts to establish which of the three versions is the oldest and most authoritative.<sup>64</sup> She

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<sup>62</sup> Helfer 1968; Fišer 1984; Grinspon 1998; Bodewitz 1973; Findly 1985.

<sup>63</sup> Olivelle 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Söhnen 1981.

argues that because the KsU is the most simple in style and gives us the fewest narrative details that it must be the oldest and the source for the other two.<sup>65</sup> Olivelle, however, rejects these claims, and more importantly, challenges the methodology that supports them. Rather than attempt to define an original version or to try to reconstruct an original version based on elements that all the texts have in common, Olivelle asks the question: what can be learned about these Upaniṣads that they present the same story in different ways? He argues that the different portrayals of Śvetaketu, as well as his father Uddālaka Āruṇi and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, tell us something about the overall stance of the different Upaniṣads. Olivelle concludes that the BU, which favours the east, is critical of Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins and presents Śvetaketu as rude and spoiled, while the CU is more conservative and presents Śvetaketu and Uddālaka Āruṇi more positively. Thus, Olivelle illustrates that the portrayal of specific characters in the Upaniṣads is part of the narrative strategy and political positioning of the texts.

This thesis will draw from a number of Olivelle's conclusions, including the differences between the BU and CU. However, whereas Olivelle concentrates on the competing philosophical orientations among the different Upaniṣads, this thesis will demonstrate that the dialogues have a general teaching, despite differences among different texts. One of the most important aspects of the three versions of Śvetaketu's story is that it shows that three different textual traditions considered the dialogue as an important means for presenting philosophical ideas. Throughout this thesis, we will show that the Upaniṣads use dialogues to convey teachings in similar ways, all of which address changes in the lives of brahmins. Although the priests of the CU seem

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<sup>65</sup> Even if the KsU version is older than the others, and it is far from conclusive that it is, there is no reason to suppose that the BU and CU used the KsU as a source. It is far more likely that this story was widely circulated and that all three versions represent revisions and modifications of a popular tale.

to have favoured the practice of teaching more than the priests of the BU who focus on debate, both texts use dialogues to connect these practices to the teachings.

Additionally, rather than focus on only one individual, in this thesis we will examine all the major characters in the Upaniṣadic dialogues. Importantly, the texts do not tell us what individual characters physically look like, nor does the narrative voice describe their psychology. Rather, literary personas are characterised almost entirely by what they say and what they do. Almost every action is an action of speech. Nevertheless, despite the lack of literary descriptions, the Upaniṣads present a number of unique individuals.

One of the striking features of the characters is that they are about true-to-life individuals. This is not to say that the narratives are historically accurate, but rather that the characters are presented as human and the actions take place in the human world. In this way, there is a realistic thrust to the narrative. The characters are humans who do things that are quite ordinary like discuss and debate; eat food and drink water; and seek material wealth and large families. In this way, the rhetorical orientation of the Upaniṣadic dialogues suggests that these characters are not fictitious. There are, however, extraordinary events that take place: fires and animals that talk, women who are possessed by celestial beings, gods and demons learning from the creator god, a person whose head shatters apart. Nonetheless, most of the characters are humans and their actions take place in the human world, in real locations in ancient India. Thus, in contrast to many of the tales in the Brāhmaṇas that take place on a mythic time scale and record the actions of gods (*devas*) and celestial beings (*gandharvas*), the Upaniṣadic narratives are firmly rooted in everyday life.

Furthermore, a number of characters are based on individuals that were already authoritative figures in Vedic literature. Characters like Śaṇḍilya, Uddālaka Āruṇi and

Yājñavalkya were already known as famous priests before they are featured in stories and dialogues. The fact that the Upaniṣadic narratives further develop the personality and authority of already important individuals suggests that an important function of Upaniṣadic narrative was to create legends about these specific individuals. As we will see, these individuals first appear merely as names that add authority to particular teachings, but by the time of the Upaniṣads these famous textual composers are developed into literary personalities.

In addition to elevating the status of already legendary figures, the characters function to highlight particular teachings, while discrediting others. While characters like Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma are always depicted positively and serve to endorse particular teachings, characters like Vairocana largely function as an example of what not to say or what not to do. Thus, the characters who are portrayed negatively serve to define Upaniṣadic philosophy through what it is not. The two main targets of the dialogues are 1) the orthodox Vedic ritualist 2) the non-aryan. As we will see, brahmin ritualists are depicted as ignorant of the most important teachings and they are described performing sacrifices that they do not understand. Worse still, Vairocana is portrayed as outside the Vedic culture altogether. He does not observe Vedic rituals, but rather adheres to non-Vedic practices. Through negative descriptions of brahmin ritualists on the one hand, and non-aryans on the other, the early Upaniṣads situate themselves as containing new teachings that oppose the sacrifice, but yet placed firmly within the Brahmanical tradition.

Alternatively, characters like Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma embody a certain way of life that is presented in contradistinction to the ritual priest. One of the central themes of the Upaniṣads is that new ideas and practices are more important than the old ones. As the Upaniṣads are critical of the stereotypical Vedic ritualists, they offer

up new models of how to be a brahmin, with Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma serving as two of the best examples. In this way, the literary characters embody or ‘flesh out’ particular teachings of the texts, anchoring abstract claims in the reality of particular individuals in real-life situations. As Gavin Flood points out, narrative is an important part of religious discourse and the construction of a religious life: ‘Narrative is central to the development of a sense of personal identity, as well as historical or traditional identity and it is through narratives that ethics are linked to the unity or coherence of a particular life’.<sup>66</sup>

Generally speaking, all the brahmins who are depicted positively serve as examples for how to be a brahmin. What distinguishes Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma is that the texts give us more information about their lives. In the way that the texts are edited, originally distinct episodes are strung together to offer a comprehensive life-story. In both cases their lives are more of a sketch than a comprehensive biography. Nevertheless, distinct episodes are collected together in a chronological order and we are presented with enough information to reconstruct a coherent life-story. Whereas Satyakāma lives the life of a teacher and married householder, Yājñavalkya represents a challenge to this ideal as the priest who debates in the court and leaves his household without any male heirs. Both Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya embody their teachings, offering two distinct models of how to be a brahmin.

#### **G. Social Context:**

In addition to anchoring the teachings to specific individuals, Upaniṣadic narrative situates discourse in a number of specific social situations. Most generally, the dialogue form itself characterises philosophy as a social practice. Rather than a solitary

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<sup>66</sup> Flood 1999: 129



Cartesian figure contemplating his own existence, or even a practitioner of yoga in a deep state of meditation, Upaniṣadic philosophers are depicted interacting with other people. In the Upaniṣads, philosophy is something that is achieved through discussion and debate, confrontation and negotiation. In this way, the dialogue form emphasises intersubjectivity. Although many teachings address knowledge about the self, this knowledge can only be achieved through dialogue with others.

Additionally, the literary realism that we described in relation to the characters also applies to the presentation of social situations. There is an emphasis on real, concrete situations. The specificity of the details of each scene suggests that brahmin composers use the dialogues and other narrative details to situate their ideas in the real world. This is not to say that the situations represented are based on real historical events, but that the literary realism of Upaniṣadic narrative serves to present philosophy as taking place within the realm of ordinary, everyday experiences. As Ruby Blondell has pointed out in her study of Plato's use of dialogue, the dialogue form 'obliges the reader to envisage philosophy as a product of particular human beings located in time and space'.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, each situation is connected to particular ways of speaking and behaving. The dialogues serve to outline to both brahmins and their dialogical partners which situations are appropriate for philosophical discussion and the proper techniques by which individuals should discuss philosophy. Importantly, we will demonstrate that each of the four kinds of dialogues represents a consistent portrayal of particular social situations. As we explore these details we will suggest that the Upaniṣads are as much about providing etiquette and proper behaviour as they are about personal

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<sup>67</sup> Blondell 2002: 48.

transformation. Or, more precisely, personal transformation can only take place through proper practice.

The importance of establishing proper modes of address and behaviour in religio-philosophical discourse is significant in regards to this thesis because the Upaniṣads have often been read as texts that exclusively address ideas and beliefs. The connection between knowledge and practice has been explored by Talal Asad, who uses a study of Saint Augustine to show the importance of rules and regulations in circumscribing knowledge practices. Whereas many modern ideas of religion place emphasis on the mind and belief, for Augustine ‘it was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth’.<sup>68</sup> Coercion was considered to be a necessary condition for the realisation of truth and monastic discipline was a principal basis of religiosity. Thus, the teachings and practices of the Church – and not the convictions of the individual practitioner – were the final authority. The implications of this are quite significant. Unlike modern definitions of religion that place religious authority upon an individual believer, Saint Augustine’s understanding of religion implies that what makes a particular act religious is not the state of mind of the practitioner, but rather the authority under which the act is performed. For example, modern scholars of religion might argue that what makes yoga a religious act and distinct from other sorts of asceticism like weight training is that a yogi is performing yoga for the sake of *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa* rather than for the sake of weight loss. However, as Asad points out, if we take into consideration Augustine’s understanding of religion, the state of mind of the practitioner is not the final authority of the religiosity of a particular act. Of equal, and in some contexts greater, importance would be if the yogi performed yoga in an ashram or in the forest,

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<sup>68</sup> Asad 1993: 35.

and whether or not the particular type of yoga which was being performed had been sanctioned by religious authority.

The Upaniṣads generally share this privileging of the authority of the practice over the beliefs or knowledge of individuals. Unlike the later Upaniṣads, the early prose texts do not focus on the state of mind of those who seek to understand *ātman*. Rather, the narratives establish the conditions under which philosophy should be discussed. The four general social situations described are education, debate, the negotiation of patronage and the conducting of sexual relations. The dialogues both establish the importance of these particular practices, as well as connect specific modes of address and modes of behaviour for each. Thus, the dialogue format outlines a mode of practice, telling its audience not only what to talk about, but what to do when talking about philosophy.

#### **H. Relation between dialogue and doctrine:**

Now let us turn to our third major theme of Upaniṣadic narrative: the relationship between the frame stories and the teachings. As Grinspon has pointed out, traditional commentators like Śaṅkara have not placed value on the narrative sections of the Upaniṣads, making a clear distinction between the story (*ākhyāna*) and the knowledge (*vidyā*): ‘For Śaṅkara ... all the stories are alike in the sense that they provide an occasion for the transmission of the Upaniṣadic “teaching”’.<sup>69</sup> Throughout this thesis, however, we will demonstrate that often there is a direct connection between the specific speakers on the one hand, and what they say on the other. This is not true in every case, however, as sometimes the same story can frame different teachings.

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<sup>69</sup> Grinspon 1998: 379-80.

Despite this, and the general hybrid nature of the texts, there is a strong correspondence between dialogue and doctrine.

The narrative sections do not only connect the teachings to specific individuals and social situations, but they also characterise the knowledge itself. Teachers introduce their teachings by announcing that it has never reached certain ears before and teachers conclude their instruction by outlining how this knowledge should remain restricted to students and sons. These details reinforce the secrecy and esoterism of the discourse: knowledge is described as secret and opaque and the path of learning is difficult and dangerous. Thus, although the dialogues place philosophy firmly within a social context, the conversations themselves remain indirect and inconclusive. This non-closure is crucial to how the brahmins depict themselves as experts in knowledge. As there is always more to be known in these dialogues, the brahmins do not actually give anything away. As such, these are as much stories about establishing the brahmins as the ones who know, as it is an expression of what they know. If Upaniṣadic teachings could easily be understood then there would no longer be the need for the brahmins. Because the teachings or meanings of the dialogues do not speak for themselves, brahmins are always needed to interpret their own stories.

In this way, the dialogues themselves do not reveal secret meanings, but rather the narrative presentation creates an atmosphere of esoterism. Malamoud has made similar observations in his discussion of esoteric language in Vedic discourses: 'The gods' secret (at least when it claims to be grounded in language) is an artificial one: it proceeds, not from a will to protect a mystery, but rather, that of creating one'.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the Upaniṣads do not so much reveal a mystical doctrine, but rather the

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<sup>70</sup> Malamoud 1996: 206.

discourse itself creates its own mystique by claiming that true knowledge remains hidden, that there is always more to be learned.

It is important to point out, however, that an esoteric discourse is not new to the late Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and early Upaniṣads. In many hymns of the Ṛgveda there is an emphasis on riddles and enigmas. As Brereton and Jamison have demonstrated, a number of Ṛgvedic hymns actually pose a question that is left unanswered, the clues only apparent to those who know the discourse.<sup>71</sup> Although there are a number of ways in which Upaniṣadic discourse is related to this Ṛgvedic tradition of enigmas, the Upaniṣads are different in that they focus on the teaching of secrets, rather than the secrets themselves.<sup>72</sup> Rather than actually posing esoteric questions, the Upaniṣads provide narratives about the transmission of this esoteric knowledge. In the process, the Upaniṣads emphasise that a secret meaning is not something that is figured out, but rather something that is taught. One can only understand the meaning of the discourse through someone else who knows.

An illustrative example of this shift from esoteric discourse to stories about individuals who engage in esoteric discourse can be seen in the CU. In this episode a Vedic student (*brahmacārin*) approaches the brahmins Śaunaka Kāpeya and Abhiprātin Kākṣaseni asking for food. However, when they refuse him he poses a question:

One god has swallowed four mighty ones!  
Who is he, the guardian of the world?  
Mortals do not see him, Kāpeya,  
Though, Abhiprātin, he's present everywhere!<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Brereton 1999; Jamison 1991.

<sup>72</sup> Some of the dialogues in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads do contain enigmatic questions similar to the Ṛgvedic style riddle. For example, in the JB Yājñavalkya poses to Janaka a riddle about the mind (*manas*) (JB 1.19-20).

<sup>73</sup> CU 4.3.6.

Here the *brahmacārin* proves that he is worthy of eating with the two brahmins because he has the proper knowledge. After he poses this question he announces: ‘You haven’t given food to a man to whom it is due’.<sup>74</sup> One of the brahmins, Śaunaka Kāpeya, replies with the following answer:

He’s the self (*ātman*) of the gods, the father of creatures!  
The wise devourer with golden teeth!  
They say his greatness is great,  
Who eats what’s not food without being eaten!<sup>75</sup>

After providing the answer to the riddle Śaunaka Kāpeya offers the student some food, symbolising that he accepts this student as a brahmin. Unlike the riddle hymns of the R̥gveda, the emphasis in this passage from the Upaniṣads is not in the riddle itself. In fact, the answer to the riddle is provided for us in Śaunaka’s response. Rather, this story recounts how knowledge of the discourse earns a *brahmacārin* the status of a brahmin, thus emphasising the interaction between the student and the two brahmins: how the *brahmacārin* proves his knowledge and what he receives in return for proving his knowledge. In this episode, the student proves he is a brahmin by showing that he knows the esoteric discourse. By posing a riddle himself, he shows that he is familiar with the secret language of the initiated.

More specifically, however, the *brahmacārin* in this episode shows that he knows the secret teaching of *ātman*, which despite its numerous meanings remains the most sought-after knowledge in the Upaniṣads. At first glance, the Upaniṣadic emphasis on discourses about *ātman* appears similar to the Socratic dictum: know thyself. However, knowledge of the self in the Upaniṣads is quite different from how it appears in the works of Plato. As Nehemas suggests: ‘The Socratic dialogues demand of their audience what Socrates asks of his interlocutors: to examine their beliefs on

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<sup>74</sup> CU 4.3.6.

<sup>75</sup> CU 4.3.7.

any subject of importance to them, to determine to what other beliefs they are logically related, to accept only those that are compatible with one another, and to live their lives accordingly'.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the Upaniṣadic dialogues also demand of their audience to know the self. However, whereas Socrates encourages his listeners to examine the self by means of introspection and self-examination, the Upaniṣadic dialogues characterise knowledge about the self as an esoteric discourse that can only be learned from the proper teacher and in very specific social situations. Thus, whereas the Socratic self is universalised and theoretically available to anyone, the Upaniṣadic self is largely restricted to brahmins; and as we will see, even when non-brahmin characters speak about the self, they are often symbolically granted the status of brahmin. Taken together, the dialogues tell brahmins how to receive a proper education, achieve fame, attract students, receive patronage, get married and have male children, thus indicating that achieving selfhood is closely related to achieving the status of a brahmin.

## **I. Outline of chapters:**

### **Chapter One:**

In Chapter One we will look at dialogues between teachers and students. We will begin by looking at Śāṇḍilya, who is most known for teaching the unity of *ātman* and *brahman*. As we will see, however, Śāṇḍilya's importance has as much to do with his personal authority as a teacher as with the particular doctrine that he imparts. His voice of authority, along with those of Yājñavalkya and Uddālaka Āruṇi, is first employed in the Brāhmaṇas as a way to connect the name of a famous teacher to particular claims

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<sup>76</sup> Nehamas 1998: 42.

about the ritual. This marks a significant moment in the composition of the Brāhmaṇas, when suddenly it becomes important to link ideas with specific teachers. By the time of the Upaniṣads, we not only see their names, but they are presented as literary characters in extended narrative scenes.

Importantly, this emphasis on the teacher coincides with dialogues that recount particular moments of instruction, as well as the initial descriptions of the *upanayana*, the initiation ceremony for a Vedic student (*brahmacārin*). As we will see, the description of the *upanayana* in the ŚB serves as a model for teaching as a social practice and all the dialogues about teaching conform to the structure of the *upanayana* in specific ways. The *upanayana*, as well as the numerous dialogues with teachers and students, establishes the pedagogical situation as an important practice in producing knowledge and defining doctrinal authority. As we focus our attention on prototypical teachers like Śāṇḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi, as well as students like Naciketas and Śvetaketu, we will see that the narratives develop an interest in the transmission of knowledge and outline the rules and regulations that accompany teaching as a social practice.

Importantly, all the dialogues between teachers and students address the topic of *ātman*. Although Śāṇḍilya, Uddālaka Āruṇi, Prajāpati and Yama offer different doctrines and employ different teaching methods, they all present teachings about *ātman* as fundamental knowledge to pass onto their students. This is significant because dialogues featuring teachers and students are not only about the transmission of knowledge, but also about preparing students for the life of a brahmin. As we will see, an important part of a teacher's instruction is how to set up a household, attract students, debate against other brahmins and pass on knowledge. Both knowledge of *ātman*, as well as these practical lessons on how to live, are central to how the



Upaniṣads define what it is to be a brahmin. The Upaniṣads claim that the transmission of this specific knowledge from teacher to student is more important than family lineage: that the status of a brahmin depends more on the identity of one's teacher than on the identity of one's father. At the end of the chapter we will look at Satyakāma as the literary figure who most embodies this Upaniṣadic ideal of the brahmin householder.

## Chapter Two:

In Chapter Two we will look at the *brahmodya*, the type of dialogue that features brahmins debating against each other. Through focusing on the characters Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya we will demonstrate that there are two types of *brahmodyas*, the private and the public, and that these different kinds of debates contain a different set of dynamics among the participants. The private debates of Uddālaka Āruṇi are about personal prestige and power among brahmins, while the public philosophical tournaments featuring Yājñavalkya have more overt political implications.

Against this background of competition and rivalry, these dialogues illustrate that Upaniṣadic discourse is not merely about what is said, but who is speaking and how the speakers advance their arguments. The dialogues both present a formal framework of how teaching and debating should be conducted and they also show us how characters employ debating tactics to trick and intimidate their opponents. Yājñavalkya, for example, does not win debates merely because of his wisdom, but because he knows the rules of the game. He not only knows what to say, but how to marshal his arguments and how to use tactics like threats and verbal tricks to silence his opponents. As we examine the social dynamics between speakers we will see that these accounts of the *brahmodya* are as much about recording debating tactics as they

are about the truth-claims of the speakers; they are as much about how to discuss philosophy as they are about what to discuss.

Another important aspect of Yājñavalkya's character is the wealth that he amasses through winning debates and securing the patronage of King Janaka. Far from leading a life of quiet contemplation, Yājñavalkya uses his discursive knowledge as a currency to gain cows, gold and the hospitality of kings. In this respect it is significant that part of the etiquette of philosophical practice is how to pay the brahmins: teachings are almost always presented as part of an economic exchange. Also there are a number of details in the narrative that specifically point out the relationship between philosophy and wealth. As we will see, the Upaniṣads do not just happen to mention how much wealth is accumulated for particular teachings, but the economic exchange is specifically highlighted throughout the narratives. On the one hand, these details contrast knowledge with material wealth and consistently present knowledge as more valuable than money or worldly possessions. On the other hand, these stories emphasise that a payment to brahmins is inextricably connected to Upaniṣadic knowledge. Significantly, Yājñavalkya's most important teachings are about *ātman*. He employs his knowledge of *ātman* to finally win the debate against the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins and he teaches about *ātman* in his private instructions to King Janaka. Through the character of Yājñavalkya, knowledge of the self is linked to superiority over other brahmins and securing patronage from kings.

### Chapter Three:

In the third chapter we will look at dialogues between brahmins and kings. As many scholars have noted, these are curious episodes because they not only depict kings teaching brahmins, but they also make the claim that important teachings originated

among the *kṣatriyas*. In this chapter we will address the question as to why texts composed by brahmins would credit kings for their own teachings.

One of the most important aspects of these dialogues is that they create a specific set of character traits for kings with kings. Both Janaka and Ajātaśatru, for example, are known for their knowledge of Upaniṣadic teachings and their generosity to brahmins. Importantly, even when these kings win debates against brahmin opponents, they are still depicted as paying them well with material wealth and hospitality. Accordingly, despite portraying kings as knowledgeable, and at times more knowledgeable than brahmins, these dialogues emphasise that the presence of a brahmin in the king's court is indispensable for achieving political power.

Furthermore, the dialogues between brahmins and kings link philosophical doctrines to political power. As teaching becomes an important part of how brahmins win patronage, discourses make promises specifically connected to the goals of rival leaders and explicitly connect the king to the ontological claims made about *ātman* and *prāṇa*. The connection of the king to *ātman* is significant because many of the teachings about *ātman* are related to attempts to manipulate the process of death and to secure immortality. Brahmins teach kings that to know the *ātman* is to guard against repeated death and to become immortal. Additionally, brahmins instruct that a king's success at ruling, defeating his enemies and winning territory is connected to his understanding of ideas like *ātman* and *prāṇa*. Thus, by making legends out of kings who know philosophy and defining *ātman* in terms of royal metaphors, brahmins make philosophy appealing to potential patrons. And by depicting knowledge as the central aspect of the king's ability to rule, the brahmins create for themselves a central role in political power.

#### **Chapter Four:**

In the fourth chapter we will look at dialogues between brahmins and women, as well as a number of creation myths and procreation rites. These sections indicate that gender is an important dynamic in Upaniṣadic teachings. As we will see, Upaniṣadic discourse assumes a predominantly male audience and outlines an explicitly male soteriology, thus tending to restrict the participation of women. Nevertheless, constructions of gender remain ambiguous and unresolved.

In the first section we will look at a number of creation myths that link ātman to the primordial male figures of Puruṣa and Prajāpati. Despite presenting an explicitly male construction of the self, these myths also highlight the complimentary participation of both male and female in the process of creation. Similarly, a number of procreation rituals explicitly link Upaniṣadic teachings with a man's virility and sexual potency. As a man's ability to achieve immortality is closely connected with his ability to have male children, these rituals are significant because they promise to give men control over the process of procreation. Nevertheless, despite bestowing procreative power to men, these rituals also highlight the necessity of female participation, as all the procreation rites in this section require ritual actions to be performed by both a brahmin and his wife.

As we will see, the gendered dimensions of Upaniṣadic teachings have important implications concerning the construction of brahmin male subjectivity. Throughout the Upaniṣads the ideal brahmin man is the married householder, with most teachings reinforcing this construction by linking immortality to having male children. As we discussed in the first chapter, Satyakāma's life story fits this ideal of the brahmin householder as much as any other character. Yājñavalkya, however, challenges this ideal both by including women in his philosophical discussions, as well

as by teaching that immortality can be attained without having children. In this respect we will look at Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya as competing ideals of the brahmin man.

We will also look closely at the female characters who actively participate in Upaniṣadic dialogues, most notably Gārgī, Jabālā and Maitreyī. Whereas some women are portrayed exclusively in ways that reinforce the ideal of the brahmin householder, these women are depicted as more active and independent. Nevertheless, although they are represented positively, their agency and authority is restricted. They participate in discussions about selfhood and immortality, yet it remains ambiguous whether these are ideals that they can achieve. As we will see, even when women speak in Upaniṣadic discourse, their voices are muted and their knowledge is called into question.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Teachers and students: The emergence of teaching as an object of discourse

#### A. Introduction:

In this chapter we will look at a number of dialogues between teachers and students. These dialogues are significant both because they connect knowledge to particular individuals and because they situate knowledge within a particular social situation. We will focus our attention on prototypical teachers like Śāṇḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi, as well as students like Śvetaketu and Naciketas. Many of these individuals first appear merely as names mentioned in the late Brāhmaṇas to add authority to particular claims about the Vedic sacrifice. This marks a significant moment in the composition of the Brāhmaṇas, when suddenly it becomes important to link ideas with specific teachers and students. Thus, in the later sections of the Brāhmaṇas sacrificial knowledge begins to be authorised through a connection to specific individuals. By the time of the Upaniṣads, these individuals not only appear as authoritative names but are also represented as literary characters.

In addition to describing a number of specific literary personas, these dialogues also present us with several more general character traits for social categories like teachers and students. Teachers show a reluctance to teach and often test pupils as a pedagogical exercise. Students are characterised by their honesty and eagerness to learn, addressing the teacher in respectful ways and offering to work for them.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, these character traits reflect the actions of teachers and students as described in the *upanayana*, the initiation of a brahmin student, as presented in the ŚB.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these literary tropes like the reluctant teacher and the enthusiastic student, which are employed subsequently throughout Indian texts, are first seen in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads.

By looking at the dialogues alongside the *upanayana*, we will demonstrate that episodes about teachers and students reinforce the rules and regulations of teaching as a social practice.

The establishment of a proper code of behaviour based on the activity of teaching is important because the Upaniṣads introduce new criteria for achieving the status of brahmin. Before the time of the early Upaniṣads, there was a tendency for the status of brahmin to be defined in terms of family lineage. The Upaniṣads, however, are critical of those who are brahmins merely by birth, and maintain that the status of brahmin can be better achieved through the proper knowledge and education. The dialogues claim that the ability, or even willingness, of a student is more important than family lineage, and ultimately that the status of a brahmin depends more on the identity of one's teacher than on the identity of one's father. We will see that these dialogues are important discourses in describing how people join the brahmin community and how people within that community negotiate power and status among each other.

One of the features that all of these dialogues have in common is that teachers instruct their students in discourses about the self. As we will see, different teachers reveal different understandings of *ātman*, but all present knowledge about the self as a fundamental part of their teachings. Śāṇḍilya identifies *ātman* with *brahman*, while Uddālaka Āruṇi describes *ātman* as the fundamental essence of life. Naciketas learns from Yama that the secret meaning of the sacrifice is to be found within himself, and Prajāpati presents *ātman* as the agent for sensing and cognising. Although these teachers, as well as others, have different, and often contradicting understandings of *ātman*, they all present knowledge about the self as a new way of thinking that is opposed to Vedic ritualism and fundamental to the education of an Upaniṣadic student.

### B. Śāṇḍilya and the teaching of *ātman* and *brahman*:

Śāṇḍilya is an appropriate place to begin our discussion because he is one of the first of the type of literary characters that we later see in Upaniṣadic dialogues. Although he does not figure prominently in the Upaniṣads, he is known as the composer of books six through ten of the ŚB, in which he appears in a number of short dialogues. In the early Upaniṣads, Śāṇḍilya appears four times, yet does not feature in any dialogues. He is mentioned in all three genealogical lists in the BU, and in the CU he is named as the teacher of a discourse about *ātman* and *brahman*. This teaching, that the self is equivalent to the underlying principle of reality, is one of the most important legacies of the early Upaniṣads.<sup>2</sup>

Śāṇḍilya's teaching begins by stating that *brahman* is the entire world.<sup>3</sup> He then describes the *ātman* as lying deep within the heart, made of mind and manifested in physical form as the *prāṇas*, thus adopting Here Śāṇḍilya adopts a conceptualisation of *ātman* as the essence of the living, cognising self that is characteristic of how *ātman* is described in many teachings. Also, Śāṇḍilya describes *ātman* as something which defies definition and categorisation: it is both smaller than a mustard seed and larger than all the worlds put together. Descriptions of *ātman* by means of contradiction and

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Brahma Sūtra and later Vedānta philosophers, the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is the fundamental teaching of all the Upaniṣads. Additionally, all the initial translators of the Upaniṣads, including Deussen, Hume and Radhakrishnan, considered this the most important teaching of the texts. Deussen argues that the entire philosophy of the Upaniṣads revolves around *ātman* and *brahman*: 'All thoughts of the Upaniṣads move around two fundamental ideas. They are *ātman* and *Brahman*'. (Deussen 1919: 38). Hume characterises the identification of *ātman* and *brahman* as a discovery that was waiting to happen since the early Vedic period. He maintains that the essential oneness of *ātman* and *brahman* was 'hinted at' even before the Upaniṣads and that there was a 'suspicion that these two theories were both of the same Being' (Hume 1921: 31).

<sup>3</sup> CU 3.14.1-4.



negation are typical throughout the Upaniṣads. As Brereton explains, Śāṇḍilya teaches about the extremes of reality through his use of paradox: ‘The self is the most intimate part of a person, the very centre of one’s being, and therefore it is the smallest of the small. Yet, at the same time, it surpasses everything. The paradox thus undercuts any exclusion or any separation of an individual from the rest of the world, for there is nothing beyond the self’.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Śāṇḍilya concludes that the *ātman*, which contains all action and desires, all smells and all tastes, is equivalent to *brahman*. When we recall that his teaching begins by defining *brahman* as the entire world, we can see that by means of equating *ātman* with *brahman* Śāṇḍilya claims that the self is the entire world. Brereton explains that this equivalence between *ātman* and *brahman* emphasises that through knowledge of the universe, one can come to understand oneself: ‘Thus, in Upanishadic terms, the *brahman* is discovered within the *ātman*, or conversely, the secret of one’s self lies in the root of all existence’.<sup>5</sup>

Although Śāṇḍilya teaches about the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman*, it is important to point out that this understanding of *ātman* is not shared by a number of other teachers in the Upaniṣads. In other passages the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is not emphasised, or even mentioned. For example, Uddālaka Āruṇi, who imparts some of the most important teachings of *ātman*, never mentions *brahman*. Additionally, in a number of discourses where *ātman* is explicitly associated with *brahman*, the term *brahman* appears in a list with a number of other important terms. These sections do not emphasise a specific correlation between *ātman* and *brahman*, but rather point to the increasing importance of *ātman* in Upaniṣadic discourse. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Brereton 1990: 130.

<sup>5</sup> Brereton 1990: 118.

BU, for example, *ātman* is equated with the *uktha*, with the *sāman* and with *brahman*. A similar type of list appears in the AU, which equates *ātman* with *brahman*, Indra, Prajāpati, all the devas, the five *mahābhūtas* and other things.<sup>6</sup> In these instances, the importance of *brahman* is not of special significance, but rather, like Prajāpati and the *devas*, represents the authority of important older Vedic ideas.

It is also significant that there are many meanings of *brahman* throughout the Upaniṣads.<sup>7</sup> As Olivelle points out: ‘Brahman may mean a “formulation of truth”, the Veda or the ultimate and basic essence of the cosmos”’.<sup>8</sup> As such, to identify something with *brahman* is to give a particular teaching a special significance. In this way, as Brereton points out, in the Upaniṣads ‘*brahman* remains an open concept’. *Brahman* is ‘the designation given to whatever principle or power a sage believes to be behind the world and to make the world explicable’.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to Śāṇḍilya’s teaching, it is important to point out that the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is not presented for its own sake, but as important knowledge for the sake of overcoming death. As have seen, at the beginning of his teaching Śāṇḍilya states that *brahman* is the entire world. He then states that what happens to someone at the time of death is in accordance with their resolve in this world. After describing *ātman* in various ways, Śāṇḍilya then returns to what happens at the time of death: ‘On departing from here after death, I will become that’.<sup>10</sup> Thus, if one understands *brahman* as the entire world, and one understands that the self is *brahman*, then one becomes the entire world at the time of death.

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<sup>6</sup> AU 3.3.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there are also a number of different meanings of *brahman* subsequent literature related to the Upaniṣads, like the BG and texts within the Vedānta tradition (see Lipner 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Olivelle 1996: lvi. Additionally, *brahman* is closely connected to sound. It is considered a verbal expression of the ultimate reality. As Olivelle points out: ‘It is important to remember that the concept always retains its verbal character as the “sound expression” or truth or reality’ (1996: lvi). For a further discussion of *brahman*, see Gonda 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Brereton 1990: 118.

<sup>10</sup> CU 3.14.4.

Although recent scholarship has expanded its considerations of the Upaniṣads to take into account its numerous and sometimes contradictory teachings, the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* remains as the central doctrine associated with the texts. Heesterman, for example, sees the merging of these two ideas as already hinted at in earlier Vedic material: 'So fire, self (*ātman*), and *brahman* were already diffusely and shiftingly associated with each other in the visionary utterances of the Vedic poets and located in man, himself the solution of the cosmic riddle of life and death'.<sup>11</sup> Brian Smith, in his studies of ritual ontology, also describes the *ātman/brahmin* equivalence as a conclusion anticipated in discussions about the sacrifice:

Taken together, then, the bandhus of ancient Indian ritualistic philosophy theoretically can account for and hook together everything in the universe. Such high ambitions can indeed be witnessed within Vedic texts, culminating perhaps in the Upaniṣads ... and its ultimate product, the equation of the microcosm (*ātman*) and macrocosm (*brahman*).<sup>12</sup>

Although neither of these scholars concentrates specifically on the Upaniṣads, their assumptions illustrate how pervasive this reading continues to be in academic discourse. The importance of *ātman/brahman* has not only been overemphasised, but more importantly, focus on this teaching has taken attention away from other sections of the texts. Olivelle has pointed out this tendency among scholars:

Even though this equation played a significant role in later developments of religion and theology in India and is the cornerstone of one of its major theological traditions, the Advaita Vedānta, it is incorrect to think that the single aim of all the Upaniṣads is to enunciate this simple truth. A close reader of these documents will note the diversity of goals that their authors pursue, chief among which are food, prosperity, power, fame, and a happy afterlife ... Many scholars ignore these and similar passages in search for the 'philosophy' or 'the fundamental conception' of the Upaniṣads.<sup>13</sup>

As the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is assumed to be the central philosophical position, or indeed, the underlying meaning of the texts, other sections have tended to

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<sup>11</sup> Heesterman 1993. This argument is similar to that of Robert Hume, who interprets different descriptions of *ātman* and *brahman* as different stages of the inevitable insight that they are one and the same. He maintains that the composers of the Upaniṣads 'were always aware of the underlying unity of all being' (Hume 1975: 1).

<sup>12</sup> Smith 1994: 12.

<sup>13</sup> Olivelle 1996: lvi.

be ignored or explained away. Hume is characteristic of this lack of consideration for the 'non-philosophical' material: 'In a few passages the Upanishads are sublime in their conception of the Infinite and of God, but more often they are puerile and groveling in trivialities and superstitions'.<sup>14</sup> As we turn our attention to the dialogues, as well as creation myths and procreation rites, we will see that rather than being extraneous, trivial material, these sections are central to the teachings of the texts.

### C. Śāṇḍilya: from ritualist to teacher

In the context of this thesis, one of the most fundamental aspects of the *ātman/brahman* teaching is that it emphasises a specific teacher. In addition to teaching the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* in the CU, Śāṇḍilya also appears as the teacher of a similar discourse on *ātman* and *brahman* in the ŚB. Thus, on the two occasions when this teaching is presented in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, Śāṇḍilya appears as the teacher. This represents an important trend in Vedic literature, as the truth of a discourse begins to be established by the authority of a specific individual.

Indeed, this trend coincides with the emergence of the dialogue form. In the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads the dialogue is employed both to emphasise the authority of specific teachers and to recount the process of the transmission of knowledge. In these passages there are descriptions of a social situation new to Vedic literature: the teacher and student discussion. Of course, the dialogical nature of some of the poems of the R̥gveda and the implicit instructions of the ritual texts suggest that the earlier Vedic material also was passed from teacher to student, and we would assume, especially in light of the accuracy with the which the texts have been

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<sup>14</sup> Hume 1975: 70.

preserved, that strict modes of speech and behaviour accompanied this transmission of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> What marks the pedagogical episodes from the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, however, is that the transmission of knowledge itself, as well as the relationship between the teacher and student, becomes a focus of the texts. Indeed, a number of stories are developed which glorify the brahmin as a teacher and which give details about how teachers and students interact with each other, thus placing these pedagogical situations as important activities through which individual brahmins derive authority. Priests are no longer praised for which sacrifices they perform, but rather their marks of authority are teaching, discussing, learning and debating. As Romila Thapar explains: ‘The new teaching moved away from *brāhmaṇas* as priests to *kṣatriyas* and *brāhmaṇas* as teachers’.<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, Śāṇḍilya is one of the first brahmins in Vedic literature who becomes known primarily as a teacher, rather than as a ritualist. Although he is never presented as participating in a full dialogue, it is significant that many of the times that his voice of authority is quoted it is from the context of his teaching a specific student. Thus, he is portrayed both as a voice of authority and as someone who articulates his knowledge within conversations with students. On a number of the occasions in which his name is mentioned he is simply quoted as an expert about ritual procedure. For example, at the end of the ninth book Śāṇḍilya is quoted about the ontological connection between the body of the sacrificer and the body of the sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Also, in a passage about the *chandasyāḥ* (the metre’s bricks) Śāṇḍilya’s authority is invoked.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As Witzel has suggested, the Vedic use of the demonstrative pronoun indicates that ‘these texts were taught and recited on the offering ground’ (1997: 259).

<sup>16</sup> Thapar 1996: 311.

<sup>17</sup> ŚB 9.5.2.15-16.

<sup>18</sup> ŚB 7.5.2.43.

In these cases, simply his name is mentioned and his status as a legendary figure is employed to give a certain authority to this particular point of ritual action.

However, in a number of other passages Śāṇḍilya is depicted in specific dialogical situations with students. This is significant because the dialogue itself begins to show an interest in recounting the transmission of knowledge and invests the act of teaching with a certain kind of authority. For example, in the *Agnirahasya*, Śāṇḍilya is quoted as an authority on building the fire altar. He is specifically named as a teacher and he is depicted disputing with his student *Sāptarathavāhani*.<sup>19</sup> On another occasion, Śāṇḍilya is described teaching the *Kaṅkatīyas*.<sup>20</sup> In these examples, not only is Śāṇḍilya named, but the narrative also gives us the identity of his students. Additionally, the text includes details about these specific teaching encounters. At the end of his teaching to the *Kaṅkatīyas*, Śāṇḍilya ‘went on his way’ saying that one should yoke day by day and unyoke day by day. Here, we see the inclusion of narrative details that connect the words of Śāṇḍilya to a particular event in space and time, thus grounding his authority in a specific moment of instruction. This is significant because at the same time that discursive knowledge is given importance over ritual activity, the act of teaching becomes an object of discourse. Thus, it is not merely the teaching itself that is emphasised, but the process of teaching and the interaction between teacher and student.

These short dialogues featuring Śāṇḍilya also show a tendency towards creating legends and stories out of textual composers, thus emphasising that texts and teachings have authors with names and life stories. Mahidāsa Aitareya is another famous teacher and textual composer who emerges as a voice of authority of esoteric

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<sup>19</sup> ŚB 10.1.4.10

<sup>20</sup> ŚB 9.4.4.17.

teachings. According to Sāyaṇa, Mahidāsa authored the first three books of the AĀ, as well as the entire AB. Like Śāṇḍilya, Mahidāsa is not only ascribed authorship to these texts, but he also is cited within these texts as the teacher of a number of discourses.<sup>21</sup> Keith has pointed out that he is most likely not the real author of these texts, although he could have been their editor or compiler.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, both Mahidāsa and Śāṇḍilya represent the kind of brahmin character portrayed in the Upaniṣads.<sup>23</sup> These characters illustrate that one of the most important literary innovations in the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads is that these texts begin to recount legends about their own composers.

By focusing on Śāṇḍilya and his development as a literary character, we can see that although the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* has often been represented as the essential teaching of the Upaniṣads, not enough attention has been paid to its teacher. Importantly, the *ātman/brahman* teaching is specifically associated with Śāṇḍilya, and along with a number of short dialogues in the ŚB, represents a focus on the authority of specific individuals, as well as attempts to describe specific moments of instruction. In this context, Śāṇḍilya is one of several teachers who gives instructions about the self and who emphasises the social practice of teaching.

#### **D. Uddālaka Āruṇi and the teaching of *tat tvam asi*:**

Uddālaka Āruṇi is another Upaniṣadic teacher known for his discourses on *ātman*. Whereas Śāṇḍilya teaches about the unity of *ātman* and *brahman*, Uddālaka describes

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<sup>21</sup> AĀ 2.1.8; 2.3.7. Also Mahidāsa is quoted in the early Upaniṣads (CU 3.16.7; JUB 4.2).

<sup>22</sup> Keith 1909: 16.

<sup>23</sup> Other authoritative teachers whose names are employed to authorise a teaching, but who do not feature in a dialogue are Vāmadeva (AU 2.5), Prācīnayogya (TU 1.6.2), Triśaṅku (TU 1.10) and Kauṣṭiki (CU 1.5.2).

*ātman* as the essence of life.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in his teaching to his son Śvetaketu, Uddālaka describes the natural processes of a number of living organisms and claims that *ātman* is the common essence that gives life to all living things.<sup>25</sup> In order to make his point, Uddālaka uses many metaphors from the natural world. For example, he compares the *ātman* that exists in all living things to the nectar that, despite originating from different trees, when gathered together forms a homogenous whole. In the same way, argues Uddālaka, all living beings merge into the existent: ‘No matter what they are in this world – whether a tiger, a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a moth, a gnat, or a mosquito – they all merge into that’.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout his instruction to his son, Uddālaka repeats one particular phrase on several occasions: *tat tvam asi*. The Vedānta tradition has rendered Uddālaka’s refrain as ‘you are that’. Accordingly, philosophers like Śaṅkara have taken *tat tvam asi* to refer to the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*. Importantly, however, Uddālaka does not once use the word *brahman*.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Brereton has shown that *tat tvam asi* is better rendered as ‘that is how you are’.<sup>28</sup> Taken this way, Uddālaka uses this refrain to explain to Śvetaketu that he is made from the same essence as phenomena in the natural world. When Uddālaka points to the *nyagrodha* tree, for example, he tells Śvetaketu that he exists in the same way as the tree: the *nyagrodha* tree grows and lives because of an invisible essence and everything exists by means of such an

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<sup>24</sup> CU 6.1.1-16.3.

<sup>25</sup> Both Kenneth Zysk and D.P. Chattopadhyaya have argued that a number of these discussions about the *ātman* and body are some of the earliest articulations of medical knowledge in ancient India. See Zysk (1991); Chattopadhyaya (1986).

<sup>26</sup> CU 6.9.3; 6.10.3.

<sup>27</sup> Uddālaka’s teaching is quite different from that of Śāṅḍilya. Not only does Uddālaka display a different understanding of *ātman*, but he does not compare *ātman* with *brahman*. In fact, as Chattopadhyaya points out, Uddālaka does not use the term *brahman* in any of his teachings: ‘Uddālaka was about the only prominent thinker in the Upaniṣads in whose discourse the word *Brahman* never occurs at all’ (1986: 41).

<sup>28</sup> Brereton 1986.



essence. Accordingly, Uddālaka teaches that *ātman* is the essential life force in all living beings.

Importantly, this dialogue not only emphasises what Uddālaka teaches, but how he teaches. Throughout his instruction to Śvetaketu, Uddālaka Āruṇi employs methods of observation and experimentation to lead Śvetaketu to a proper understanding. This is characteristic of a change in the means for attaining knowledge that can be seen throughout the early Upaniṣads. As Thapar points out, the Upaniṣads do not merely construct a different ontological framework, but knowledge is established in different ways: ‘The nature of the change was a shift from acceptance of the Vedas as revealed and as controlled by ritual to the possibility that knowledge could derive from intuition, observation, and analysis’.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Uddālaka’s teaching is important not only for the philosophical claims he makes, but also for the methods he prescribes for acquiring knowledge.

As we have seen, Uddālaka appeals to observable and natural phenomena throughout his teaching, instructing his son about *ātman* by means of various observations and experiments concerning the natural world like bees making honey, rivers flowing towards an ocean and sap flowing out of a tree. In order to show the subtlety of *ātman*, he instructs Śvetaketu to cut a banyan fruit and then to cut the seeds within the fruit. When he has cut the seed, Śvetaketu proclaims that he cannot see anything inside it. The fine essence within the seed that cannot even be seen is likened to *ātman*. To show how *ātman* permeates everything but cannot be seen, Uddālaka asks Śvetaketu to put a chunk of salt in water. A day later, Uddālaka cannot locate the chunk of salt in the jug of water. However, he finds that even though he cannot see the salt it can be tasted in every part of the jug. Through this experiment Śvetaketu learns

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<sup>29</sup> Thapar 1994: 307.

that, like salt in water, *ātman* permeates his entire body despite the fact that it is not immediately observable to the senses.

Additionally, at one point Uddālaka instructs his son to refrain from eating for fifteen days. After this period he asks Śvetaketu to recite the Ṛk, Yajur and Sāma Vedas. However, because he had fasted for fifteen days, Śvetaketu cannot remember any material from the texts. Uddālaka then compares Śvetaketu's inability to remember the Vedas to a sacrificial fire that goes out because it runs out of fuel. Uddālaka concludes: 'Eat, and, then you will learn from me'.<sup>30</sup> As opposed to traditional Vedic knowledge that is based around the ontological connections which are made through ritual action, Uddālaka explains the physiological connection between nourishment and memory. Śvetaketu understands what his father is teaching because he actually experiences a memory loss when he goes for fifteen days without eating. Although these may seem like quite simple experiments, they indicate a significant change in how knowledge is acquired.

#### **E. Uddālaka and Śvetaketu: Acting out the *upanayana***

By far the most important method for acquiring knowledge that is adopted throughout the Upaniṣadic dialogues, however, is the establishment of specific modes of address and behaviour that accompany teaching. In this way, a significant aspect of the dialogue between Uddālaka and Śvetaketu is that it closely resembles the *upanayana*, as it is presented in the ŚB.<sup>31</sup> The *upanayana* is the initiation ceremony through which one enters into the life of a Vedic student (*brahmacārin*). The first detailed description

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<sup>30</sup> CU 6.7.3.

<sup>31</sup> ŚB 11.5.4.1-18. There are similar descriptions of the *upanayana* in the Pārashara Gṛha Sūtra (2.2), Aśvalāyana Gṛha Sūtra (1.20) and Sāṅkhāyana Gṛha Sūtra (2.1). However, as the material in the Brāhmaṇas is more closely associated with the Upaniṣads, we will confine our description of the *upanayana* to how it appears in the ŚB.

of the *upanayana* appears in the eleventh book of the ŚB. Importantly, a number of the details in this presentation of the *upanayana* are featured in the dialogues between teachers and students throughout the early Upaniṣads.

The *upanayana* begins with the student approaching the teacher. The student announces: 'I have come for Brahmācārya ... let me be a Brahmācārī'. The teacher responds with a question, in this case asking for the student's name. Importantly, the first action that the teacher performs is to take his student by the right hand and to make invocations to various gods. The ŚB later explains that by laying his right hand on the student, the teacher becomes pregnant with him.<sup>32</sup> After these invocations, the teacher proclaims: 'You are a Brahmācārī'. He then asks him to sip water, to do work and to put fuel on the fire. The ŚB account also describes a number of practices that are features of initiation in later literature: the teaching of the Sāvitrī, giving the staff, the girdle and garment to the student, and placing fuel on the fire.

Kaelber has argued that this presentation of the *upanayana* is of archaic origin: '...although the first extended literary reference to the student's initiation (*Upanayana*) is found in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, there can be no question, as scholars have demonstrated, that this initiation as well as other activities of the *brahmācārī* are of archaic origin'.<sup>33</sup> Whether this description of teaching represents an older practice or not, it is significant that the *upanayana* is first described in the late Brāhmaṇas. Thus, the *upanayana* becomes an object of discourse at the same time that dialogues between teachers and students begin to appear in the texts. Furthermore, the

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<sup>32</sup> ŚB 11.5.4.12.

<sup>33</sup> Kaelber 1989: 111. Although Kaelber is keen to present the *upanayana* as having an archaic origin, there is no evidence that this description in the ŚB harkens back to an earlier practice. In fact, Eliade does not 'demonstrate' that the *upanayana* is of archaic origin, but rather says that the *upanayana* is a 'homologue to primitive puberty initiations' (1958: 53).

*upanayana* shares a number of details with these dialogues, together establishing the normative practices within which Upaniṣadic knowledge is learned.

The establishment of a proper code of behaviour based on the activity of teaching is important because education is a primary means of delimiting and controlling knowledge. Talal Asad makes this point in describing the importance of educational practices in establishing religious doctrine: ‘The connection between religious theory and practice is fundamentally a matter of intervention – of constructing religion in the world (and not in the mind) through definitional discourses, interpreting true meanings, excluding some utterances and practices and including others’.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Upaniṣadic dialogues both outline particular modes of address and behaviour, as well as connect these actions to specific teachings. Throughout the dialogues, the authority of Upaniṣadic knowledge is generated by the social practices of teaching.

The dialogue between Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu, for example, not only emphasises a new orientation of knowledge and a new way of attaining it, but also outlines the rules and regulations for a brahmin student. The dialogue begins when Uddālaka advises his son to become a *brahmacārin*. He explains that everyone in the family had received the traditional Vedic education and that no one of their clan ‘is the kind of Brahmin who is so only because of birth’.<sup>35</sup> Here, Uddālaka acknowledges that there are two kinds of brahmins: those who are brahmins because of their birth and those who are brahmins because of their knowledge. Śvetaketu, although already a brahmin by birth, is encouraged to earn his status as a brahmin through a proper education, and thus become a true brahmin like his father and grandfather.

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<sup>34</sup> Asad 1996: 44.

<sup>35</sup> CU 6.1.1.

Accordingly, Śvetaketu leaves his father and becomes a *brahmacārin* for twelve years, during which time he learns all the Vedas. The dialogue tells us that Śvetaketu's education begins when he is twelve and continues until he is twenty-four years old. Importantly, these details about the number of years of a *brahmacarya* education are shared throughout the Upaniṣads.<sup>36</sup> For example, Upakosala Kāmalāyana lives as a Vedic student under Satyakāma for twelve years as well.

Like a number of teachings in the Upaniṣads, this dialogue is critical of traditional Vedic learning. Śvetaketu, after finishing his studies, returns with a swollen head 'thinking himself to be learned, and arrogant'.<sup>37</sup> However, Śvetaketu's education proves to be incomplete, as he does not know his father's discourse about the rules of substitution. Thus, even though Śvetaketu has studied for twelve years and has learned all the Vedas, he has not learned the type of knowledge that is characteristic of Upaniṣadic discourse. Specifically, the particular teaching that Śvetaketu does not know is that 'by which one hears what has not been heard before, thinks of what has not been thought before, and perceives what has not been perceived before'.<sup>38</sup> This description emphasises that this kind of knowledge is new and distinct from traditional Vedic knowledge. Indeed, it has not been heard of, thought of or perceived by Śvetaketu's teachers. Śvetaketu reiterates this point when he reflects that if his 'illustrious' (*bhagavantas*) Vedic teachers had known this that they would have taught it to him.

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<sup>36</sup> There are exceptions: the CU mentions a *brahmacārin* who settles permanently at his teacher's house (2.23.1). Olivelle, following Böhtlingk and Senart, takes this passage as a late interpolation (1996: 334-5 n.). Additionally, Indra is a *brahmacārin* for one hundred and one years (CU 8.11.3). See Olivelle for a discussion on how the life of a *brahmacārin* became incorporated into the āśrama system (Olivelle 1993).

<sup>37</sup> CU 6.1.2-3.

<sup>38</sup> CU 6.1.3.

In this dialogue Uddālaka Āruṇi represents the Upaniṣadic teacher who is familiar with knowledge about *ātman*, and he is contrasted with the ‘illustrious’ men who personify the traditional Vedic teacher. Although Uddālaka is Śvetaketu’s father, the dialogue does not present him as his son’s original teacher, as Śvetaketu initially goes away to receive his education. Thus, Uddālaka emerges as Śvetaketu’s true teacher because he knows the true discourse, and not merely because he is supposed to be his son’s teacher. In this dialogue he is presented favorably and contrasted to the official teachers. This is an important feature of this dialogue because it is different from how their pedagogical relationship appears in other contexts. In a dialogue that immediately precedes this one in the CU, Uddālaka is cast as his son’s original teacher, and Śvetaketu is again portrayed as an arrogant student who has received traditional Vedic teaching, but who has not learned the most fundamental knowledge. In this case, however, the king Pravāhaṇa Jaivali is characterised as knowledgeable, while Uddālaka Āruṇi is the ignorant and orthodox brahmin. We will examine this dialogue in more detail in Chapter Three, however, in this discussion the episode between Uddālaka and his son further illustrates how the dialogue form employs literary characters to present Upaniṣadic knowledge in contradistinction to traditional Vedic learning.

Although this dialogue is critical of Śvetaketu’s orthodox teachers, it does not reject traditional Vedic knowledge completely. Rather, it suggests that his teachers had lost touch with the teachings of Vedic antiquity. Uddālaka connects his own teachings to the Vedic tradition when later in this dialogue he says that his own discourse about the three appearances represents the knowledge of ‘those extremely wealthy and

immensely learned householders of old'.<sup>39</sup> Uddālaka's ambivalence in respect to the Vedic tradition is characteristic of Upaniṣadic discourse in general. The Upaniṣads firmly place themselves within the Vedic tradition, yet at the same time make a number of pointed critiques about Vedic ideas and practices. In the dialogues this ambivalence is played out through the interaction of particular characters. While characters like Yājñavalkya, Naciketas and Satyakāma represent the ideal Upaniṣadic brahmins, Uddālaka Āruṇi is often cast as the traditional Kuru-Pāṇcāla priest who is out of touch with the contemporary discourse.

#### **F. Indra as the persistent student:**

Another dialogue that depicts the student/teacher relationship features Prajāpati teaching both Indra and Virocana. In this episode, the Vedic myth of the battle between Devas and Asuras is recast as a competition over knowledge of *ātman*.<sup>40</sup> The battle between the Devas and Asuras is repeated several times throughout the Ṛgveda and is a myth that continues in the Brāhmaṇas as well as the Mahābhārata and Purāṇas.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, as the textual and social contexts change, Indra's ability to defeat the Asuras is attributed to different means. In the Ṛgveda it is *soma* that gives Indra the ability to conquer the Asuras, while in the Brāhmaṇas the most important factor is the performance of the sacrifice. In the CU, however, Indra and Virocana attempt to establish their supremacy over one another by means of mastering

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<sup>39</sup> CU 6.4.5.

<sup>40</sup> CU 8.7.2. In the Introduction we briefly mentioned that Upaniṣadic dialogues represent real life situations and situate philosophy within everyday social practices. How do we then account for the appearance of Prajāpati, Indra and Virocana? As we have mentioned, these mythical characters connect Upaniṣadic discourse with the authority of traditional Vedic figures. These examples show how the composers of Upaniṣadic discourses use legendary figures from Vedic folklore to add legitimacy to new doctrines. For the most part, however, Upaniṣadic characters are based on humans rather than gods. Even in this dialogue, except for the exaggerated life span of Indra, the words and actions of all the main characters are consistent with depictions of humans in other dialogues.

<sup>41</sup> This myth also appears in other places in the Upaniṣads. In the CU (1.2.1), the Devas and Asuras compete with each other over the udgītha (high chant).

Upaniṣadic discourse. Significantly, Prajāpati, the god most associated with the ontology of the sacrifice, appears as the teacher of this new knowledge.<sup>42</sup> In this appearance of the cosmic battle, knowledge of the *ātman* replaces the sacrifice as that which is considered most important to the gods. Moreover, Indra and Virocana are not interested in *ātman* merely for the sake of knowledge, but wish to obtain the worlds and have their desires fulfilled. In this way, like *soma* in the R̥gveda and the sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas, knowledge of *ātman* is directly linked to military and political power. The dialogue emphasises this point by repeating that knowledge of *ātman* leads to obtaining all the worlds and fulfilling all desires.<sup>43</sup>

Importantly, this dialogue also outlines a number of practices associated with the *upanayana*. The dialogue begins when both Indra and Virocana approach Prajāpati in order to learn about *ātman*, arriving in the presence of Prajāpati carrying firewood.<sup>44</sup> These two narrative details are shared by a number of the dialogues throughout the Upaniṣads. The proper procedure in educational relationships is that the students should approach the teacher and that the student should arrive willing to work for him. The usual tasks that students perform for teachers are tending the fires and taking care of the cows. The CU, for example, describes Satyakāma working for his teacher by herding his cows, building a fire and feeding the fire with wood.<sup>45</sup> In the Upaniṣads, carrying firewood is the most common metaphor for a student who offers to gather fuel and tend the fires for his teacher.

Another important characteristic of Indra as a model student is that he is persistent in his search for knowledge. This is emphasised as Indra continues to return to Prajāpati in search of the true knowledge of *ātman*. In the Upaniṣads, teachers do

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<sup>42</sup> Prajāpati also appears as a teacher in the BU where he instructs gods, demons and humans (BU 5.2.1).

<sup>43</sup> CU 8.7.2.

<sup>44</sup> CU 8.7.2.

<sup>45</sup> CU 4.6.1.



not part with knowledge easily, so students like Indra have to show that they are willing to work hard and be patient for the rewards of learning the discourse.<sup>46</sup> Initially, both Indra and Virocana live as *brahmacārins* for twelve years before Prajāpati offers to give them instruction. This is not only a period of receiving instruction, but also a period when students may have to endure a number of tests to prove they are worthy of their teacher's knowledge. Even after thirty-two years, Prajāpati asks Indra and Virocana: 'Why have you lived here? What do you want?'<sup>47</sup> This points to the Upaniṣadic teacher's characteristic aloofness and the importance for students to remain persistent in their quest for knowledge. Throughout this dialogue, Indra has to prove that he is both sufficiently intelligent and eager to learn.

When Prajāpati finally gets around to giving his lesson, he imparts false knowledge, telling Indra and Virocana that the self that one sees in a mirror is the true *ātman*. He then orders them both to dress themselves beautifully and he sends them on their way thinking that the external appearance of the self is the true *ātman*. However, Indra soon recognises that this teaching cannot be correct. Before arriving back with the other gods, Indra returns to Prajāpati, again with firewood, and announces that he sees nothing worthwhile in this teaching. He sees that this kind of knowledge will not last: if the *ātman* is just the body, then the *ātman* would die when the body dies. Prajāpati tells him that if he stays for another thirty-two years, he will teach him again.

Prajāpati's second teaching is that the true *ātman* goes happily about in a dream. Again, Indra leaves Prajāpati thinking that he has learned about *ātman*, but again he realises that Prajāpati has given him a false teaching. For a third time, Indra approaches Prajāpati, again carrying firewood and demanding further instruction. On

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<sup>46</sup> In fact, the reluctance to teach, at least initially, is one of the most common traits of the Upaniṣadic teacher: Yama is reluctant to teach Naciketas (KaU 1.12); Raikva does not impart his knowledge initially to Jānaśruti (CU 4.1).

<sup>47</sup> CU 8.7.3.

this occasion, Prajāpati connects *ātman* with the state of dreamless sleep. In the following chapter we will see that this particular teaching is associated with Yājñavalkya. In this dialogue, however, this presenting of the self is not the true *ātman*, but rather is another false teaching that Prajāpati imparts to Indra. Once again, however, Indra realises that this is not the true *ātman*, and he returns with firewood one more time to finally hear the true teaching. This time, Prajāpati demands that he stay for five more years, to bring his total number of years as a *brahmacārin* to one hundred and one. In his final teaching to Indra, Prajāpati explains that the true *ātman* is immortal because it leaves the body at the time of death.

Although *ātman* is the central idea of Prajāpati's teachings, his definition of *ātman* differs considerably from the teachings of both Śāṇḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi. For Prajāpati *ātman* is described as the one who is aware behind the faculties of smell, sight, speech, hearing and thinking. In this way, *ātman* is described as a consciousness that is the base of the faculties of sensing and cognising. In order to make his point, Prajāpati first presents a number of false teachings, which both represent rival positions and test Indra's resolve as a student. Importantly, by challenging Indra's ability to distinguish the correct teaching from the false discourses, Prajāpati prepares his student for the life of a brahmin teacher. As we will see in the following chapter, being a brahmin is a competitive occupation that includes elements of risk and deceit. Some brahmins do not know the meaning of the rituals they perform, while others challenge each other in debates with questions that they do not know themselves. When we look at Prajāpati's instructions in this context, we can see that an important aspect of imparting false teachings is preparing his student for these situations. Thus, Prajāpati's deceit is not conducted out of spite, but out of pedagogy. By not telling

Indra what he knows, he thus leads Indra towards the truth, in this case knowledge of the self.

In this dialogue, as Indra is a model of how to be a good Upaniṣadic student, Virocana is depicted as the superficial student who believes in false teachings. As such, Virocana serves to represent non-Vedic practices in a negative way. Mohanty has suggested that Virocana's understanding of *ātman* as the material body represents the point of view of the Lokāyatas.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, this understanding of *ātman* as the body (*dehātmavāda*) is a central claim of the anti-Brahmanical materialism of the Lokāyata tradition. Whether or not this is a specific reference to the Lokāyatas, however, it is clear that Virocana's position represents a non-Vedic point of view. For example, Virocana is also depicted as following practices that are non-Vedic: he does not give gifts to brahmins, has no faith and does not offer sacrifices. Furthermore, the narrative tells us that people who share this false understanding of *ātman* 'perform the funerary rites for the body of a dead person with offerings of food, garments, and ornaments, for they believe that in this way they will win the next world'.<sup>49</sup> Like in Uddālaka's teaching to Śvetaketu, this dialogue presents a situation in which Upaniṣadic knowledge is contrasted with rival teachings and practices. Whereas Uddālaka's teaching is in contradistinction to traditional Vedic knowledge, in this dialogue

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<sup>48</sup> Mohanty 2000: 3-4. The Lokāyatas, also known as the Cārvākas, were a materialist school of philosophy who only accepted sense perception as a valid means for acquiring knowledge. Although perhaps originally one of the branches of Vedic learning, in post-Upaniṣadic times the Lokāyatas were often represented by philosophical doxologies, along with the Buddhists and the Jains, as one of the main rival positions to the orthodox darśanas (See Mohanty 2000; King 1998 16-23). Chattopadhyaya claims that in the CU (1.12) Baka Dālbyha expresses views associated with the Lokāyatas (1959: 76-9).

<sup>49</sup> CU 8.8.5 (pretasya śarīram bhikṣayā vasanenālaṅkāreṇeti saṁskurvanti, etena hy amuṁ lokaṁ ieṣyanto manyante). This practice of treating the body of the deceased is similar to how the Buddha's body is treated in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: 'Then the Mallas ordered their men to bring perfumes and wreaths, and all the musicians, and with five hundred sets of garments they went to the sāḷ-grove where the Lord's body was lying. And there they honoured, paid respects, worshipped and adored the Lord's body with dance and song and music, with garlands and scents, making awnings and circular tents in order to spend their day there' (DN 2.159).

Prajāpati's teaching of *ātman* is directly contrasted with a number of false doctrines of the self, some of which are explicitly non-Vedic.

### G. Nārada and Sanatkumāra: *Ātman* more important than the Vedas

In a dialogue between Nārada and Sanatkumāra, however, knowledge of *ātman* is directly contrasted with more traditional Vedic knowledge.<sup>50</sup> This dialogue, which we have mentioned briefly at the beginning of this thesis, features the ancient ṛṣi Nārada as the student and Sanatkumāra, one of the mind-born sons of Brahmā, as the teacher. As we have seen, Nārada approaches his teacher having learned the entire Vedic curriculum, yet still acknowledging his ignorance of *ātman*, thus indicating that the entire corpus of Vedic knowledge is presented as inferior to Upaniṣadic discourses about the self. In addition to highlighting *ātman*, this dialogue also emphasises a number of teaching practices that are mentioned in the *upanayana*, as well as in other dialogues. For example, a number of the characteristics of Indra as a model student are shared in this dialogue by Nārada. Like Indra, Nārada shows an initiative to learn and on several occasions demands to know more from his teacher. In fact, throughout this dialogue Nārada repeats the same refrain on fourteen occasions, saying: 'Sir, teach me more'.<sup>51</sup> This is also a characteristic of Śvetaketu in his dialogue with his father Uddālaka Āruṇi. Śvetaketu makes the same request to his father nine different times.<sup>52</sup> Although these refrains could be explained in terms of a literary convention, they also serve to characterise the speakers who say them. In these cases, students not only approach their teachers, but continue to display a desire to learn. If, like Virocana, they

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<sup>50</sup> CU 7.1

<sup>51</sup> CU 7.1.1-7.15.

<sup>52</sup> CU 6.5.1-6.15.3.

are satisfied with the initial utterances of their teacher, they are in danger of returning home with a false teaching.

As Nārada is cast as a model Upaniṣadic student, Sanatkumāra is typical of a number of teachers throughout the Upaniṣads. An important part of the etiquette practised by teachers is to receive students with a question about who they are or what they already know. As we have seen in the *upanayana* in the ŚB, the teacher greets his student by asking his name. Similarly, when Nārada asks him for a teaching, Sanatkumāra responds by asking him what he already knows: ‘Come to me with what you know. Then I’ll tell you what more there is to know’.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, there are other examples that illustrate these common features between the *upanayana* and the pedagogical dialogues. In the ŚB Dhīra Sāptaparṇeya approaches Mahāsāla Jābāla asking him for a teaching and Jābāla greets him by asking him what he already knows; also, when King Pravāhaṇa receives Śvetaketu, he asks him if he has learned from his father.<sup>54</sup> These situations not only indicate the close relationship between these dialogues and *upanayana*, but also reinforce the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. As we will see in the context of debate, asking the first question is often associated with the position of power. In these dialogues, asking the first question is equated with the superior status of the teacher.

Another salient feature of Sanatkumāra’s instruction to Nārada is that he addresses how to speak well in a debate. As we have seen with Prajāpati’s instruction to Indra, an important aspect of education in the Upaniṣads is preparing students for the activities in a brahmin’s life. In this case, Sanatkumāra prepares Nārada for debating against other brahmins by telling him how to respond if someone accuses him

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<sup>53</sup> CU 7.1.1.

<sup>54</sup> ŚB 10.3.3.1; BU 6.2.1; CU 5.3.1.

of being an *ativādin*. Throughout the Upaniṣads, one who debates well is called an *ativādin*.<sup>55</sup> In some instances, this term is used negatively to suggest that one who argues well does not necessarily have true knowledge. For example, in the *brahmodya* in King Janaka's court, Śākalya accuses Yājñavalkya of being an *ativādin*, when he doubts whether Yājñavalkya's debating skills are representative of true wisdom.<sup>56</sup> Sanatkumāra, however, describes an *ativādin* positively and suggests that this is an important aspect of his teaching to Nārada. He instructs Nārada that one should readily admit to being an *ativādin*, saying that if someone accuses him of out-talking, 'he should readily acknowledge, "Yes, I am a man who out-talks", and not deny it.'<sup>57</sup> Yet, Sanatkumāra specifies that one should out-talk correctly by knowing how to speak with truth.<sup>58</sup> In this dialogue, we see that Sanatkumāra not only imparts to Nārada a teaching of *ātman*, but he also reinforces the procedure of the *upanayana* and prepares Nārada for the important brahmin activity of debate.

#### **H. Naciketas and the initiation of an Upaniṣadic brahmin:**

One of the most well known episodes between a student and teacher in the Upaniṣads features Naciketas and Yama. In this dialogue, Yama grants three wishes to Naciketas and eventually teaches him how to overcome death. This story, as it appears in the KaU, is from an episode in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa in which Yama explains to Naciketas the origin of the sacrificial fire altar.<sup>59</sup> As such, it richly employs symbolism

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<sup>55</sup> Olivelle translates *ativādin* as a man who 'out-talks' (1996: 353n).

<sup>56</sup> BU 3.9.19.

<sup>57</sup> CU 7.15.4.

<sup>58</sup> As Roebuck explains, to out-talk is 'a doubtful quality in one without knowledge, but proper in one with knowledge beyond the normal limits'. (2000: 221n.).

<sup>59</sup> TB 3.11.8. The fact that this episode in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad appears almost exactly as it does in the TB has led most scholars to think that this *adhyāya* is one of the older portions of the Upaniṣads. Also it is commonly assumed that this dialogue was originally part of the Kāṭhaka Brāhmaṇa. Passages 1, 2 & 4 of the KaU are exactly the same as passages in the TB. In the TB his wishes are 1) return to his father

pertaining to the *agnicayana* sacrifice. Importantly, 'naciketas' is one of the names associated with the fire altar in the *agnicayana*.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Naciketa's father, Vājaśravas, appears in the ŚB as building and teaching about the *agnicayana*.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to Naciketas, Yama is also connected to the imagery surrounding the fire altar. One of the numerous correspondences discussed in the Agnirahasya is the connection between the man in the sun, the gold man and the *puruṣa* in the heart, representing the connection between the sun, the sacrificial altar and the human body.<sup>62</sup> All three are described as containing a *puruṣa* within it.<sup>63</sup> The golden man, which is buried under the first layer of bricks of the *agnicayana* fire altar, is the *puruṣa* within the body of the fire that corresponds with the *puruṣa* in the sun and the *puruṣa* within the heart in the human body: 'That man in yonder orb and that gold man are the same as this man in the right eye'.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, the Agnirahasya states that 'the man in yonder orb is no other than Death (Yama)'.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the character of Yama is not only the personification of death, but also he corresponds with the *puruṣa* within the sun.

In this dialogue, it is significant that both Naciketas and Yama are personifications of aspects of the *agnicayana*. In the KaU, however, as both figures are presented as literary characters, the emphasis shifts away from the sacrifice itself to

2) to learn the durability (non-decaying) of sacrifice and rituals acts ('*na+kṣit*': a play on words of Naciketas. He is not only named after a fire altar, but also he is one who does not decay) 3) to learn how to ward off death. A similar story is in the RV 10.135.

<sup>60</sup> Another meaning of 'naciketas' is 'I do not know'. Although Whitney demonstrates the linguistic foundation for this rendering, he himself is skeptical of this interpretation; 'This, though not entirely without parallels, would be an irregular and an odd thing in Sanskrit derivation' (Whitney 1890: 91). However, there is no reason to assume that only one meaning was intended. Considering that Naciketas learns from Yama, his name as one who does not know is quite appropriate.

<sup>61</sup> ŚB 10.5.5.1.

<sup>62</sup> This metaphor continues throughout the Upaniṣads as well. For example, the TU states: 'He who is here in a man and he who is there in the sun – they are one and the same' (TU 2.8). Also see CU (1.7.5).

<sup>63</sup> ŚB 10.5.2.1 for the sun and 10.6.4.1 for the human body.

<sup>64</sup> ŚB 10.5.2.7

<sup>65</sup> ŚB 10.5.2.3.

Naciketas and Yama as individuals. Furthermore, this is consistent with the content of Yama's instruction. Yama teaches Naciketas that the knowledge of how to build the fire altar is more important than actually building it. Yama proclaims that the true *agnicayana* is found within the self: 'The fire altar which leads to heaven ... lies hidden within the cave of the heart'.<sup>66</sup>

The episode begins when Naciketas observes that the gifts given by his father at the sacrifice are not worthy of any rewards. After Naciketas criticises his father's inadequate sacrifice of milked and barren animals, he asks his father three times to whom his father will give him. After asking for the third time, his father declares that he will give him away to Yama. This incident is interesting because it articulates another pointed criticism of sacrifice. Naciketas observes that the rituals are being performed without the proper knowledge or intentions behind them. We see another example of this kind of critique of sacrifice in the story of Uṣasti Cākrāyaṇa.<sup>67</sup> In this episode, which we will explore in more detail in the following chapter, Uṣasti accuses a number of brahmins of performing a sacrifice without proper knowledge. Importantly, in both examples, the criticism is not simply that sacrifices should not be performed, but that they are not being practised correctly. In the case of Naciketas, his subsequent dialogue with Yama is presented in direct contrast to his father's poor attempt of performing a sacrifice.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, Naciketas' entire encounter can be seen as a redefinition of sacrifice. Rather than offer milked and barren animals, Naciketas offers himself in a ritual death before his is reborn again through the initiation ceremony. Similarly, James Helfer has

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<sup>66</sup> KaU 1.14.

<sup>67</sup> CU 1.10.1-13. Another section in the CU states that only a man with knowledge could carry out a sacrifice (CU 2.24.1).

<sup>68</sup> O'Flaherty has commented briefly on this story. She argues that this episode expresses the theme of the son who emerges as better than his father, which she argues is an important motif throughout Vedic literature (1985: 43-44).



interpreted the story of Naciketas and Yama as a model of the actual initiation of an *adhvaryu* priest: ‘... the actual initiatory rite of an *adhvaryu* is used as the model or structure on the basis of which the dialogue between Naciketas and Yama is formed’.<sup>69</sup> Naciketas has to go through the initiation ceremony, which is a ritual death, before he can emerge as a new person with new knowledge. According to Helfer, although, the sacrifice is not a literal offering, it is symbolically important for Naciketas as an initiate.

In this respect, it is significant that on other occasions the Upaniṣads compare the life of a *brahmacārin* with a sacrifice. The CU states: ‘Now, what people normally call a sacrifice (*yajña*) is, in reality, the life of a celibate student (*brahmacarya*)’.<sup>70</sup> By means of a number of creative etymologies, this passage goes on to connect several different aspects of the sacrifice (the offering, the vow of silence, the fasting) with the life of a student. In the case of Naciketas, the metaphor is employed to present his sacrifice as favourable in contrast with his father’s literal sacrifice. Thus, Naciketas replaces the traditional Vedic sacrifice with his own sacrifice: becoming a *brahmacārin*.

After having been given to Yama by his father, Naciketas stays in Yama’s house for three days and nights without food or water. This time period is important because it corresponds to the time period of the *upanayana* as presented in the ŚB: ‘By laying his right hand on (the pupil), the teacher becomes pregnant (with him): in the third (night) he is born as a Brahmana with the Sāvitrī’.<sup>71</sup> Helfer argues that this period of three nights symbolises a trial and consists of part of Naciketas’ initiation. This seems convincing, especially as it corresponds to other tests set by teachers in

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<sup>69</sup> Helfer 1968: 367.

<sup>70</sup> CU 8.5.1-4.

<sup>71</sup> ŚB 11.5.4.12. Here, we see the symbolism connecting initiation with procreation. The *brahmacārin* is considered the embryo of his teacher, his initiation representing his second birth.

Upaniṣadic dialogues.<sup>72</sup> However, although it is clear that his teaching represents an initiation, it is significant that Yama's instruction to Naciketas is presented in direct contrast to the decaying practice of ritualism that Naciketas learns from his father. In this way, Naciketas is not educated to be an *adhvaryu* priest in the orthodox sense, but rather is initiated into the new teachings of Upaniṣadic discourse.

This point is further suggested by the apparent *varṇa* distinction between Naciketas and Yama. When Yama returns, he addresses Naciketas as a brahmin and offers him three wishes. There is also a verse that suggests that Yama offers Naciketas water:

A Brahmin guest enters a house  
as the fire in all men.  
Bring water, O Vaivasvata,  
that is how they appease him.<sup>73</sup>

Helfer interprets Yama's offering of water as part of the initiation ceremony, invoking Eliade to suggest that water is part of the universal structure for initiation: 'In initiation rituals water confers a new birth'.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, offering water to a student is part of the *upanayana* as described in the ŚB. However, this detail does not occur in other dialogues between teachers and students. In this instance, it is more likely that Yama offers Naciketas water in order to show him the proper hospitality as a brahmin guest. Interestingly, in other Upaniṣadic dialogues, water is only offered when a *kṣatriya* is teaching a brahmin. This is important because it suggests that there is a *varṇa* difference between Yama and Naciketas. This is further indicated in the BU, which lists both Yama and Mṛtyu as the gods of *kṣatriyas*.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the hospitality that Yama shows Naciketas, even when he is the one doing the teaching is similar to a

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<sup>72</sup> As we will see, Satyakāma leaves his student in his house for a prolonged period of time as well.

<sup>73</sup> KaU 1.7.

<sup>74</sup> As quoted in Helfer 1968: 357 (Eliade 1958).

<sup>75</sup> BU 1.4.11.

number of dialogues where a *kṣatriya* offers gifts to brahmins, even though the *kṣatriya* is doing the teaching.

Thus, if Yama is a *kṣatriya*, then his instruction to Naciketas does not represent the initiation of an orthodox *adhvaryu* priest. If this story were about the initiation of a Vedic ritualist, we would assume that Naciketas would be initiated by an *adhvaryu* priest and that the building of the altar would be the most important aspect of the initiation. However, this dialogue presents itself specifically in contradistinction to the initiation of a Vedic ritualist. Yama plays the role of the teacher, as opposed to a brahmin with specific connections to the Yajurveda, and Naciketas is initiated into a new kind of knowledge that is opposed to ritualism.

Like other teachers in the Upaniṣads, Yama's instruction is about the self. Yama does not discuss *ātman* directly, but he focuses on typical Upaniṣadic themes like the individual and how to overcome death. These ideas are presented in Yama's responses to the three wishes of Naciketas. After his first wish, to re-establish connections with his father, Naciketas asks for the knowledge of how to construct the *naciketas* fire altar.<sup>76</sup> Yama explains every detail of the altar, the type of brick, how many and how they are to be placed, and he equates the *naciketas* altar with the beginning of the world. Like in the Agnirahasya, building the altar is ritually creating the world. However, in Yama's teaching the importance of the *agnicayana* is in knowing it and not actually building it. Yama explains that the knowledge of the *naciketas* fire altar lies hidden in the cave of the heart. As we have seen, both *ātman*

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<sup>76</sup> As part of his first wish, Naciketas also wants his father's anger to subside and he wants his own death to be symbolic rather than actual. In his first wish we see that Naciketas desires to re-establish his connection with the world, thus illustrating the importance of family lineage. Although in the dialogue with Satyakāma we will see that the lineage of teachers is more important than the lineage of families, the Upaniṣads nevertheless place importance on the relationship between father and son.

and *prāṇa* are represented as dwelling within the heart. Thus, Yama's teaching links knowledge of the fire altar with discourses about *ātman* and *prāṇa*.

After this explanation, Yama names the altar after Naciketas. Although this is not specifically the initiation of an *adhvaryu* priest, this event can be seen in terms of Helfer's portrayal of this dialogue as a classical model of initiation. As Helfer has pointed out, it is an aspect of many initiatory rites that the student receives a new name during an initiation ceremony. In the KaU, Yama does not refer to Naciketas by name until he grants him the wish of knowing the fire altar, indicating that this could be a name only bestowed upon Naciketas after he has received instruction from Yama. More specifically, however, by naming the altar after Naciketas, Yama links the knowledge about the altar with Naciketas on an individual level. Thus, Yama instructs to Naciketas that his knowledge of himself is more significant than performing the sacrifice. Yama teaches that with this knowledge one can build the eternal out of that which is fleeting.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, this contrast between Upaniṣadic teachings and Vedic ritualism is emphasised in Naciketas' third and final wish, to understand death. In this context, death is both figuratively Naciketas' teacher, represented by the literary character Yama, as well as literally the subject of Yama's teaching. Thus, as Yama is personified as his teacher, Naciketas not only learns about death, but also comes to know Yama himself, and through knowing him both literally and figuratively becomes equipped with the possibility of overcoming death.

Throughout this dialogue, Naciketas displays both persistence and eagerness to learn. Naciketas asks to know about death, but Yama refuses to teach this to him saying that this knowledge is too subtle and difficult to understand. Despite Yama's

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<sup>77</sup> KaU 2.10.

reluctance, Naciketas persists, saying that nothing could be equal to this knowledge. Yama continues to refuse and instead promises him sons and grandsons, livestock and elephants, horses and gold and a lifelong as long as he chooses. Naciketas, however, does not accept these material rewards saying that these things cannot make one happy. In this exchange between teacher and student, Naciketas, like Indra and Nārada, demonstrates that he understands the value of what his teacher knows, proving to Yama that he is worthy of learning this important discourse.

### **I. The Taitirīya Upaniṣad and the graduation of a brahmin student:**

Throughout this chapter we have seen that both the *upanayana* and the dialogues depicting teachers and students emphasise teaching, especially the initiation of a brahmin student. Whereas these accounts concentrate on how the student first approaches the teacher and asks for instructions, the TU addresses the final words that a teacher should say to his student upon his graduation. According to the TU, when a student has reached the completion of his Vedic studies, the teacher should say to him: ‘Speak the truth. Follow the law. Do not neglect your private recitation of the Veda. After you have given a valuable gift to the teacher, do not cut off your family line’.<sup>78</sup> As we discussed in the Introduction, the Upaniṣadic dialogues do not only present philosophical notions of the self, they also teach students how to be a particular kind of self, namely the brahmin householder. These instructions in the TU make it clear that philosophical teachings are connected to particular ways of living one’s life. In this case, the teacher emphasises that a student must give gifts to his teacher and live the life of a householder.

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<sup>78</sup> TU 1.11.1.

The emphasis on giving gifts not only reinforces the respectful etiquette with which a student should treat his teacher, but also highlights the economic aspect of the teacher/student relationship. Indeed, through giving gifts and doing work, students are important contributors to the income of their teachers. In a chant to Indra, the TU illustrates that brahmin teachers depend upon students for their livelihood: ‘Students, may they come to me. Students, may they flock to me. Students, may they rush to me. Students, may they be controlled. Students, may they be tranquil’.<sup>79</sup> In this invocation there is an explicit link between accumulating wealth and attracting students. In the very next line, after these five requests for students, the speaker asks to be both famous and rich: ‘May I be famous among men. More affluent than the very rich’.<sup>80</sup> Thus, despite an apparent aloofness and reluctance to teach, Upaniṣadic teachers are quite aware of their dependence upon students for their livelihoods. Teachers never give away their knowledge for free, as there is always an exchange involved. In this respect, Satyakāma and Prajāpati indicate that some teachers make a business out of teaching by taking on several students at the same time.

Additionally, the teacher’s instruction to his student reinforces the authority of brahmins. As part of the graduation instructions in the TU, the teacher tells his student that brahmins are always the ultimate authority for Vedic practices: ‘Now, if you ever have a doubt regarding a rite or a practice – should there be experienced, qualified and gentle Brahmins devoted to the law who are able to make a judgment in that matter, you should observe how they act in that regard and behave likewise’.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the TU emphasises the importance of respecting teachers and other family members. Students are instructed to treat their mother, father, teacher and guests like gods. The

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<sup>79</sup> TU 1.4.2.

<sup>80</sup> TU 1.4.3.

<sup>81</sup> TU 1.11.3-4.

use of education to reinforce the superiority of brahmins is also employed by Sanatkumāra in his instruction to Nārada. He tells Nārada what to do if someone does not speak correctly to his father, mother, brother, sister, teacher or a brahmin. Pravāhaṇa's teaching of the five fires, which we will explore in more detail in Chapter Three, also concludes with an ethical instruction that includes the protection of brahmins and teachers.<sup>82</sup> These examples show that knowledge about *ātman*, *prāṇa* and overcoming death is not abstracted from social practices. An indelible aspect of Upaniṣadic knowledge is learning how to properly respect teachers, brahmins and the family structure.

Importantly, these instructions are not merely general advice that a teacher should give his students after completing his studies, but rather, these guidelines are presented as a fundamental part of his teachings. This point is emphasised at the end of the TU where the ethical rules and regulations are explicitly called *upaniṣads*: 'This is the rule of substitution. This is the teaching. This is the hidden teaching (*upaniṣad*) of the Veda'.<sup>83</sup> Thus, by using the word *upaniṣad*, the social practices of giving gifts and respecting brahmins are equated with the esoteric discourses about the self. Similarly, the TU describes knowledge about the relationship between teacher and students as an *upaniṣad*, thereby placing their relationship on a theoretical level. At the beginning of the TU, there are explanations for the hidden connections (*upaniṣads*) for five topics: the worlds, the lights, knowledge, progeny and the body (*ātman*). The *upaniṣad* for knowledge emphasises the teacher/student relationship: 'The preceding word is the teacher, the following word is the pupil, their union is knowledge, and their link is instruction. So it is with reference to knowledge'.<sup>84</sup> Through the use of the word

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<sup>82</sup> A man should not steal gold, drink liquor, kill a brahmin or sleep with a brahmin's wife (CU 5.10.9).

<sup>83</sup> TU 1.11.4.

<sup>84</sup> TU 1.3.2.

*upaniṣad*, this passage reinforces the fact that the relationship between teacher and student is intrinsic to discursive knowledge.

These passages from the TU are significant because they are representative of a general preoccupation with the transmission of knowledge. Not only do the dialogues develop stories out of particular moments of instruction, but they also set out rules by which this knowledge should be transmitted in the future. Thus, one of the most important shifts from the Brāhmaṇas to the Upaniṣads is a transformation in the transmission of knowledge. This point is further emphasised by the numerous genealogies of teachers and students that appear throughout the Upaniṣads. The BU, for example, is divided into three sections, all of which end with a genealogy. These genealogies are not family pedigrees, but rather are lineages of teachers and students. Like the dialogues, they focus attention on particular individuals, as well as the discursive activity of teaching. Genealogies also give a sense of history to the teachings. Even though a number of Upaniṣadic discourses present themselves as new or non-traditional, the genealogies trace particular teachings all the way back to mythological figures like Āditya, Prajāpati and Brahman. Furthermore, the genealogies serve to reinforce the authority of a number of the same teachers in the dialogues. Authoritative teachers like Śāṇḍilya, Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya all appear in genealogical lists.

This attention to the transmission of knowledge is also incorporated into the discourses themselves. At the end of a number of teachings throughout the Upaniṣads, there are instructions as to how knowledge should be passed. The AĀ, for example, instructs that only those who live with a student and intend to become teachers should learn this knowledge: 'These *saṃhitas* let no one tell to one who is not a resident pupil, who has not been with the teacher for one year, and who is not himself to



become a teacher. Thus says the teacher'.<sup>85</sup> In the BU there is a description of how to make a mixture for attaining greatness. At the end of the instructions, the narrative tells us that this teaching had been passed down by several authoritative teachers like Uddālaka Āruṇi, Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma. After listing these teachers, the BU says: 'One should not disclose this to anyone who is not a son or a pupil'.<sup>86</sup> Importantly, in these examples the status of a student is represented as equivalent to that of a son of a brahmin.

The CU also gives specific instructions for how knowledge should be transmitted. At the end of what is known as the honey doctrine, the narrative tells us that the genealogy of this teaching began with Brahmā, who instructed Prajāpati, who imparted it to Manu, who has passed it down to Uddālaka Āruṇi. Like in the BU, the genealogy is followed by instructions for how to pass this knowledge in the future: 'So, a father should impart this formulation of truth only to his eldest son or a worthy pupil, and never to anyone else, even if he were to offer him this earth girded by the waters and filled with wealth, because that formulation is far greater than all that'.<sup>87</sup> Thus, although the *upanayana* and dialogues about teaching challenge the exclusiveness of passing down knowledge through family lines, they do not imply that Upaniṣadic discourses are open to everyone.

As we will see, this point is also illustrated in the story of Jabālā and her son Satyakāma. Satyakāma does not achieve the status of brahmin through his birth, but rather by telling the truth, suggesting that the status of a brahmin is something that can be achieved through one's actions and knowledge rather than through one's family lineage. Similarly, Yājñavalkya proves himself superior to his teacher's son Śvetaketu,

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<sup>85</sup> AĀ 3.2.6.

<sup>86</sup> BU 6.3.12.

<sup>87</sup> CU 3.11.4.

and numerous *kṣatriyas* teach brahmins from respected lineages. In contradistinction to sacrificial knowledge, Upanisadic knowledge is not passed down through families, but rather through the institutionalised practice of the *upanayana*.

### J. Satyakāma: The beginning of a brahmin hagiography<sup>88</sup>

Satyakāma is one of the most well known characters in the Upaniṣads. He appears in a dialogue with his mother Jābālā, when he approaches his mother to ask about his lineage so that he can be a Vedic student.<sup>89</sup> His mother, however, replies that she is unable to determine who his father is because when she was younger she moved around a lot and had been with several men. She then instructs him to take her name, and thus introduce himself as Satyakāma Jābāla. After this conversation with his mother, Satyakāma approaches the teacher Hāridrumata and asks to be admitted as his student. Significantly, Satyakāma approaches Hāridrumata exactly as outlined in the ŚB's description of the *upanayana*: 'Sir, I want to live under you as a vedic student (*brahmacārin*). I come to you, sir, as your student'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> It is not my intention here to argue that these distinct narrative incidents constitute hagiographies, but rather to suggest that, like hagiographies, the 'life-stories' of both Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya connect their teachings to particular ways of living. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the influence that the literary presentation of the Upaniṣads had on the early Buddhist texts, which would more explicitly connect episodes of the Buddha into a narrative presentation of his life story. For more on hagiography in South Asian religious traditions see Schober 1997.

<sup>89</sup> CU 4.4.1-5. Interestingly, although this story suggests that Satyakāma does not originally come from a brahmin family, his family name already appears in earlier texts. On two occasions in the ŚB, we see the character Mahāsāla Jābāla. The texts give no indication, however, what the relation is between Mahāsāla and Satyakāma. On one of the occasions where Mahāsāla appears in the ŚB, he is one of the five wealthy householders that approaches Aśvapati for a teaching about ātman (10.6.1). Curiously, in the version of this dialogue that appears in the CU, all the names of the householders are the same except that Mahāsāla is replaced by Prācīnaśāla Aupamanyava. Thus, as the CU wants to emphasise the uncertainty of Satyakāma's family lineage, it omits the one other Vedic character who shares his family name. Nevertheless, unless Mahāsāla is Satyakāma's son, then his appearance in previous Vedic literature undermines one of the most important points of Satyakāma's story in the CU. For indeed, Satyakāma was perhaps always already a brahmin. The BU mentions a similar name, Jābālāyana, in one of its genealogies (4.6.1).

<sup>90</sup> CU 4.4.3.

Hāridrumata also follows closely to the script provided in the ŚB, as he responds to Satyakāma's request by asking him about his lineage. At this point, Satyakāma repeats what his mother had told him and introduces himself as Satyakāma Jābāla. Although Satyakāma does not know his proper lineage, Hāridrumata is impressed with his truthfulness and proclaims that only a brahmin could speak like this. He then orders Satyakāma to bring him some firewood and he initiates him as his student.

This often cited story is an example of how Upaniṣadic discourse confers the status of brahmin onto those with the proper knowledge (or in Satyakāma's case, the potential for learning proper knowledge), rather than merely according to family lineage. As we have seen, Uddālaka Āruṇi also recognises that there are two kinds of brahmins: those who are brahmins by birth and those who achieve the status of brahmin through education. Throughout the Upaniṣads, the true brahmin is defined as one with the proper education. The CU emphasises this point by claiming that only those who find the world of *brahman* by means of living the life of a *brahmacārin* obtain freedom of movements in all worlds.<sup>91</sup>

Before Hāridrumata even begins to instruct him, Satyakāma establishes himself as a worthy student. After the initiation, Hāridrumata give his student four hundred emaciated cows and asks him to look after them.<sup>92</sup> Satyakāma accepts them, promising not to return until he has a thousand cows. The dialogue suggests that this is a test set by Hāridrumata, to see if Satyakāma could make skinny and feeble cows prosper. The narrative tells us that Hāridrumata specifically picked out the most weak and sick cows

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<sup>91</sup> CU 8.4.3.

<sup>92</sup> There are several other examples of students who take care of their teacher's cows. The ŚB tells us that a student should guard his teacher, his teacher's house and his cows (ŚB 3.6.2.15). Also Yājñavalkya instructs his student to take care of the cows he claim before his debate with the Kuru-Pāñcāla brahmins (BU 3.1.2).

for Satyakāma to take care of. After a few years, however, Satyakāma fulfills his promise by increasing the number of cows to one thousand. That this is a test put to Satyakāma by his teacher is reinforced by the fact that soon after this a bull begins to instruct him about *brahman*. Subsequently, Satyakāma is taught by a fire, a goose and a water bird. Importantly, all of these instructions take place at sunset after he had completed his duties of building a fire, rounding up the cows and fueling the fire. Here we see that immediately after completing the work that he had promised his teacher, he is rewarded with a number of teachings about *brahman*. In this way, the transmission of Upaniṣadic knowledge is directly connected with the tasks that a student performs for his teacher.<sup>93</sup>

When Satyakāma finally returns to his teacher's house, Hāridrumata notices that his student 'has the glow of a man who knows *brahman*'.<sup>94</sup> However, this dialogue emphasises that despite his glow, the disciplinary practice of learning Upaniṣadic teachings is as important as the knowledge itself. When Hāridrumata questions Satyakāma about where he has learned about *brahman*, Satyakāma replies that it was not from humans. It is impossible to determine the exact symbolism relating to Satyakāma's unorthodox teachers. Do they represent other cultural traditions? Do they suggest that Satyakāma has learned about *brahman* by means of his own observations of natural phenomena? Although it is difficult to speculate on these questions, it is clear that Satyakāma understands that if he is truly to be considered a brahmin, he must receive instruction from his official teacher.<sup>95</sup> After acknowledging that non-humans had taught him, Satyakāma adds: 'But if it pleases

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<sup>93</sup> Another example of this exchange between student and teacher of work for teaching occurs in the AĀ. In this episode Tāruṣya guards his teacher's cows for one year just for the sake of learning a secret teaching (upaniṣad) (AĀ 3.1.6).

<sup>94</sup> CU 4.9.2 (brahma-vid iva vai ... bhāsi)

<sup>95</sup> This point is also part of Uddālaka's instruction to Śvetaketu (CU 6.14.2).

you, sir, you should teach it to me yourself, for I have heard from people of your eminence that knowledge leads one more securely to the goal only when it is learnt from a teacher'.<sup>96</sup> The narrative emphasises that this is the real teaching by adding that when Hāridrumata instructed him 'he did so without leaving anything out', suggesting that only a discursively sanctioned teacher knows the complete teaching.<sup>97</sup> Thus, in the story of Satyakāma, we see that although his family lineage is not important, that his educational lineage is.

Satyakāma reiterates this point when he later becomes a teacher. Satyakāma receives Upakosala as his student, but then embarks on a journey before ever teaching him. When he is away, his student, like Satyakāma himself, receives instruction from unlikely sources. In this case, his teachers are the household fire, the southern fire and the offertorial fire. When Satyakāma returns he recognises that now his own student has the 'glow' of a man who knows brahman. However, when he learns that the fires taught Upakosala, he considers his student's knowledge incomplete and promises to teach him himself.<sup>98</sup> That both Satyakāma and Upakosala are described as having the glow of a man who knows *brahman* suggests that their knowledge led to a physical transformation that was discernible to their respective teachers. Nevertheless, in both cases even knowledge that led to this perceivable transformation was considered less valuable than instruction from a proper teacher.

These dialogues featuring Satyakāma not only emphasise the proper mode of instruction, but also contribute to presenting an integrated biographical account of a particular brahmin life. Satyakāma is the only character in the Upaniṣads whom the

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<sup>96</sup> CU 4.9.3.

<sup>97</sup> CU 4.9.3.

<sup>98</sup> Satyakāma's teaching is closely related to the discourse of the five fires, which we will discuss in more detail in the third chapter.

narrative follows from his initiation as a student all the way to becoming a teacher with his own students. The dialogues describe his adventures from his uncertain family origins, through to his tenure as a *brahmacārin*, and finally as an authoritative brahmin teacher who legitimises Upaniṣadic discourse. As a teacher, Satyakāma lives as a married householder who supports himself by taking on students. Taken together, the life of Satyakāma serves as a hagiographical model for the ideal brahmin life: he is the embodiment of a number of discourses that advocate the life of the brahmin teacher. As we will develop further throughout this thesis, although there are general similarities among characters and dialogical situations among different Upaniṣads, there are also important differences that point to competing agendas among the textual traditions. In this respect, it is significant that most of the dialogues about teaching that we have discussed in this chapter are taken from the CU. Thus, the specific focus on teaching and the development of Satyakāma as a model for the Upaniṣadic teacher indicates that this particular ideal was part of the agenda of the CU. In the following chapter we will see how the BU focuses on Satyakāma's rival, Yājñavalkya. Rather than establish himself through teaching, Yājñavalkya proves his authority through philosophical debate.

#### **K. Conclusion:**

Throughout all the dialogues between teachers and students, the most important teachings are about the self. However, teachers have different understandings of *ātman* and they employ different teaching methods: Uddālaka teaches Śvetaketu by means of observation and experimentation; Prajāpati leads Indra to an understanding of *ātman* by first imparting false knowledge; Yama teaches Naciketas by making him endure a difficult initiation; and Satyakāma teaches by means of isolating his student. All these

methods ultimately bring the student to knowledge of the self and although different methods are exercised, all of them follow the script of the *upanayana* to some degree and reinforce the importance of a proper teacher and proper lineage.

One of the fundamental features of these dialogues is that they cast knowledge of *ātman* in opposition to traditional Vedic knowledge. The mythic battle between Indra and Virocana over control of the sacrifice is presented as a competition over knowledge of the self; Yama teaches Naciketas that the true knowledge of the sacrifice is to be found within the self; Nārada approaches Sanatkumāra claiming that despite his traditional Vedic education, he is ignorant about the self. This emphasis on the superiority of knowledge of the self over traditional Vedic knowledge is also connected to the Upaniṣadic re-definition of the status of brahmin. As Uddālaka Āruṇi comments, some are brahmins merely because of their birth, while others earn their status of brahmin through their knowledge. In this way, these dialogues not only present teachings about the self as important, but they represent these teachings as the quintessential knowledge in defining the ‘new’ brahmin.

We began this chapter with Śāṇḍilya, who is most known for his teachings of *ātman* and *brahman*. As we have seen, however, not only is this particular doctrine misrepresented as the fundamental teaching of all the Upaniṣads, but also not enough attention has been paid to Śāṇḍilya as its teacher. Despite not appearing in any teacher/student dialogue in the Upaniṣads, Śāṇḍilya was one of the first authoritative names to appear in narrative episodes about teaching in the Brāhmaṇas. Not only do these scenes indicate the emergence of the more detailed narratives we find in the Upaniṣads, but they also place importance on the act of teaching itself, as well as the authority of teachers.

Indeed, the importance placed on the practice of teaching is further emphasised by the fact that the first description of the *upanayana* coincides with the development of narrative scenes about teaching. Both the *upanayana* and the pedagogical dialogues reinforce particular modes of address and behaviour that accompany and control the transmission of knowledge. This focus on the transmission of knowledge is also represented in the instructions that come at the end of a number of teachings, as well as the genealogies in the BU and the TU's account of a brahmin's graduation. By means of presenting important discourses in the form of conversations between teachers and students and outlining to whom this knowledge should be passed, brahmin composers establish hierarchies of authority, define appropriate philosophical positions and establish normative practices through which knowledge can be disseminated.

This emphasis on how knowledge is transmitted is particularly emphasised in stories about Satyakāma and his student. As we have seen, both Satyakāma and his student learn from unlikely sources the very discourses that their teachers were going to impart to them. In both cases, however, despite the fact that their own teachers recognise that they have the 'glow' of someone who knows, their teachers instruct them anyway, thus reinforcing a common theme found throughout these dialogues: the authority of the teacher and the proper means of transmission are as important as the knowledge itself.

Finally, Satyakāma's story introduced us to one of the first integrated biographies of the life of a brahmin. As we followed his life from his departure from home in pursuit of an education to his becoming a teacher with a wife and his own students, Satyakāma's life-story is the embodiment of the brahmin householder. As his biography illustrates, it is not only important that students learn particular teachings as



part of their Upaniṣadic education, but it is crucial for them to learn how to use their knowledge to attract their own students and set up a household. In the next chapter we will see that in addition to teaching, one of the most important social practices for brahmins is the *brahmodya*: the philosophical debate.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Debates between brahmins: The competitive dynamics of the *brahmodya*

#### A. Introduction:

In this chapter we will look at dialogues that feature brahmins debating against other brahmins. Similar to the *upanayana*, these debates (*brahmodya*) present themselves as a distinct practice, often in contrast to the performance of sacrifice. Yet, unlike the dialogues about teaching, the *brahmodya* is characterised as competitive and aggressive, with the reputations of brahmins, and sometimes political rivalries, at stake.

We will begin our discussion by tracing the literary presentation of the *brahmodya* from the Brāhmaṇas to the Upaniṣads, examining two types of *brahmodyas*: 1) private debates that are a competition between two priests and 2) public tournaments among several priests that usually take place in the presence of the king. We will look at two dialogues featuring Uddālaka Āruṇi as examples of the first type of *brahmodya*. Then we will turn our attention to Yājñavalkya and see how he is particularly connected to the second type of *brahmodya*, those depicted as a philosophical tournament. In both types of debate we will pay particular attention to the participants, as well as their debating tactics. As we will see, individuals often win arguments as much by their personal authority and how they debate, as by which arguments they put forth. We will closely examine a particular *brahmodya* where Yājñavalkya defeats a number of brahmins from Kuru-Pañcāla. This debate illustrates that in addition to competing for reputation, the debates of brahmin priests represent larger regional and political struggles. Finally, we will look at how Yājñavalkya exchanges his ideas for large amounts of material goods. Through the negotiations of

Yājñavalkya, as well as other brahmins, we will see that setting an economic value for philosophical teachings is an important aspect of Upaniṣadic discourse.

### **B. The *brahmodya* and the sacrifice:**

As several scholars have suggested, verbal contests are reflected in Vedic discourse as far back as the Ṛgveda.<sup>1</sup> These exchanges emphasise a riddle or esoteric meaning that could only become apparent with the proper understanding of ritual discourse. Although the riddle hymns of the Ṛgveda share certain similarities with Upaniṣadic accounts of debate, the word *brahmodya* makes its initial appearance in the Brāhmaṇas.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of the term *brahmodya* coincides with a change in focus in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads from posing an enigmatic question to recounting the incident of debate itself. These narrative descriptions of debates between two individuals, as well as philosophical tournaments featuring many priests, show an interest in the participants of philosophical debate and how they interact with each other. Even though they emerged out of a sacrificial context, the *brahmodyas*, as they appear in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, no longer reflect a ritual situation. The participants often debate about topics relating to ritual, but the debate itself is described as a separate event which is often characterised in contradistinction to the practice of sacrifice. As Bodewitz has argued: ‘There is no denying that the real *brahmodyas* (discussions with aggressive aspects in which often some issue is at stake) are found only in the late Brāhmaṇas such as the ŚB, JB and GB. This should warn us against drawing hasty conclusions as to the original nature of these verbal contests’,<sup>3</sup> Thompson agrees with this separation of the older discourse, which poses

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<sup>1</sup> Renou 1949; Brereton 1999; Thompson 1997 & 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 1997: 22.

<sup>3</sup> Bodewitz 1976: 183.

enigmatic questions, with the narrative accounts of the *brahmodya* that appear in the Upaniṣads. He describes the *brahmodyas* of the Vāyasaneṣi Saṃhitā as scripted for the performance within the *śrauta* ritual with memorised recitations. The *brahmodyas* of the Upaniṣads, however, were ‘unrehearsed, improvised performances, sometimes like examinations, but in any case *real* competitions – with the reputations, and perhaps even the heads, of the participants apparently very much at stake’.<sup>4</sup> That the Upaniṣadic *brahmodyas* record real events remains speculative, nevertheless the literary presentation of the *brahmodya* establishes debate as a practice closely associated with Upaniṣadic discourse. Furthermore, these accounts outline the rules and tactics of the *brahmodya*. In this way, the *brahmodya* is presented as an important activity for brahmins to use their knowledge in the social world.

Two of the first examples of *brahmodyas* in Vedic literature appear in the ŚB where a verbal exchange is embedded within a royal ritual, in this case the *aśvamedha*.<sup>5</sup> These examples are illustrative because they serve as a model for understanding the structure of the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya*. However, these scripted exchanges also highlight important differences from the ‘unrehearsed’ and ‘improvised’ debates that appear in the Upaniṣads. In the first example, which takes place prior to the binding of the sacrificial victims to the stakes, the *hotṛ* and *brahman* priests ask each other four questions.<sup>6</sup> These questions, all of which are reminiscent of the kinds of questions posed in the riddle hymns of the Ṛgveda, are presented as a rehearsed exchange where both the questions and answers are known in advance, thus focusing on the ritualised verbal exchange itself and not on the individual participants.

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson 1997: 13.

<sup>5</sup> Witzel points out that the *brahmodya* was usually part of large-scale *soma* rituals and the *aśvamedha* (1987: 385).

<sup>6</sup> ŚB 13.2.6.9-17.

Similarly, the second *brahmodya*, which occurs after the omenta have been roasted, features the four main priests, as well as the *yajamāna*.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the *hotṛ* and *advaryu* each trade one question and answer, followed by a similar exchange between the *udgātṛ* and *brahman* priests. This format is then repeated a second time. As in the case with the previous example, this *brahmodyas* is scripted in the sense that there is a definite structure as to how and when the priests exchange questions. That the questions are part of a standard format is indicated by the fact that these two *brahmodyas* share three of the same questions and answers.<sup>8</sup>

These examples provide two alternative scenarios shared by the narrative accounts of the *brahmodya* throughout the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads. The first is an example of the private debate that features only two brahmins with no official audience. The second example is a public debate that includes a number of contestants in the presence of the *yajamāna*. Despite these similarities in structure, however, there are some crucial differences between these verbal exchanges that are embedded within ritual actions and the narrative accounts of debates. Whereas these two examples from the *aśvamedha* refer to the priests generically according to their function, the Upaniṣadic accounts emphasise the individual literary personalities. Accordingly, the verbal exchanges that take place within the ritual are not competitive: there are no winners or losers and nothing is at stake.

Additionally, as we will see with two dialogues featuring Uddālaka Āruṇi, the Upaniṣadic *brahmodyas* further develop the difference between the private and public

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<sup>7</sup> ŚB 13.5.2.11-22.

<sup>8</sup> Both *brahmodyas* begin with the same question: who is it that walks alone. In both cases the answer is the sun. The eighth question in the first *brahmodya* is the sixth question in the second (q: who is the tawny one; a: the night and day). The fifth question of the first *brahmodya* is also the fifth question of the second (q: what is the first conception; a: the sky). Additionally, some of the same exchanges that appear in these two examples also appear in VS 23.45-6. See Thompson for a further discussion of these types of riddles (1997: 14-5).

debate: the private *brahmodya* becomes a contest of personal rivalry where the loser becomes the student of the winner; and the public debates are presented as philosophical tournaments with a number of contestants where the outcome has political implications. In both types of *brahmodya* there is always something at stake, whether it be the reputation of individual brahmins or material rewards, and on many occasions these debates are a forum in which brahmins compete for the patronage of kings. Unlike the *brahmodyas* that appear as part of the ritual, the accounts of the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya* focus on the individual participants and characterise debate as an important activity in establishing the authority of eminent brahmins like Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya.

### C. Uddālaka Āruṇi and the *brahmodya* in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa:

In the ŚB, Uddālaka Āruṇi participates in two private *brahmodyas*, both of which feature just one other opponent and no audience. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the most important appearances of Uddālaka Āruṇi is in the CU when he teaches Śvetaketu about *ātman*. In this dialogue he is characterised as a wise teacher and a good father who is generally knowledgeable about Upaniṣadic teachings. Furthermore, his knowledge is given added authority as it is contrasted with what Śvetaketu has learned from more traditional teachers. This depiction of Uddālaka, however, is quite different from how he appears in the texts of the Yajurveda, the ŚB and BU. Although he is respected, Uddālaka is the character who most often loses debates to both brahmins and *kṣatriyas* who are more familiar with typically Upaniṣadic discourses. This ambiguity in Uddālaka's character is shared throughout the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads where he is both the respected, eminent Kuru-Pāṇcāla brahmin and the caricature of the orthodox priest who learns from unlikely

sources. In the following two dialogues, we will see both of these aspects of Uddālaka's literary personality. These episodes are significant both because of Uddālaka Āruṇi's close association with the *brahmodya*, as well as the fact that both accounts contain a curious threat that is closely connected to verbal debate: the threat that the loser will lose his head.

In the first dialogue Śauceya Prācīnayogya challenges Uddālaka Āruṇi to a *brahmodya* about the *agnihotra*.<sup>9</sup> He proceeds to ask Uddālaka a number of questions regarding specific ritual actions: why wipe the spoon with grass after cleaning it the first time, why place the spoon in the southern part of the *vedi* after wiping it a second time, etc. After each one of Uddālaka's answers, there is a refrain spoken by Śauceya where he acknowledges that he already knows what Uddālaka has told him: 'This much, then reverend sir, we two know in common'.<sup>10</sup> The repetition of this phrase indicates that Śauceya is testing Uddālaka's knowledge. As Bodewitz has noted, before his final answer Uddālaka does not reveal any new teachings, yet Śauceya's last question is about what one should do when all the fires go out and there is no wind. Uddālaka instructs that in this case he would drink the oblation himself, saying that if one has proper knowledge of the *agnihotra*, it will belong to all deities and will be successful. In this dialogue, Uddālaka's teaching assumes a general understanding of *prāṇa* as the essence of life, which is shared throughout the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads. Just as all the vital powers in the body depend on *prāṇa*, so all cosmic entities rely on the cosmic *prāṇa*. And at the time of death, the *prāṇa* in the body enters into the cosmic *prāṇa*. When Uddālaka offers this instruction, then Śauceya

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<sup>9</sup> ŚB 11.5.3.1-13. For a discussion about this dialogue and its relation to the *agnihotra* and *prāṇāgnihotra* see Bodewitz (1973: 220-229). Another version of this episode appears in the GB (1.3.14).

<sup>10</sup> ŚB 11.5.3.7-11.

finally admits that this is something that he does not know. Consequently, Śauceya approaches Uddālaka with firewood and asks to be his student. Unlike the students we discussed in the previous chapter who approach their teachers with firewood at the beginning of the dialogue, Śauceya does not ask to be Uddālaka's student until after he has tested him, until after Uddālaka has proven that he can teach Śauceya something that he does not already know.

Significantly, this dialogue is one of the first episodes to relate the famous threat of the shattering head to the practice of philosophical debate. Immediately after Śauceya asks to become his student, Uddālaka warns him: 'If you had not spoken thus, your head would have shattered apart'.<sup>11</sup> The meaning of this phrase has been debated among scholars. Witzel has argued that it should be understood as a literal curse and that it therefore functions as a mortal threat. Taken this way, brahmins essentially risk their lives when they enter into a verbal debate. Insler, however, has argued that the original meaning of this phrase was to lose one's presence of mind: 'It means "one's head flies off or away" in the sense of "one loses self-possession or presence of mind, becomes confused", precisely as the Oxford English Dictionary defines the English idiom "to lose one's head"'.<sup>12</sup> We will return to this issue later in this chapter, but in the context of this dialogue we will follow Insler's interpretation on the grounds that the narrative context does not give any indication that this is an actual curse of death. Rather, this encounter between Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śauceya Prācīnayogya is about authority and who has the higher position in relation to each other. Thus, when Uddālaka suggests that Śauceya would have lost his head, he is essentially saying that

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<sup>11</sup> ŚB 11.5.3.13 (*yād evaṃ nāvākṣyo, mūrdhā te vyàpatiṣyat*).

<sup>12</sup> Insler 1989/90: 113-4.



if Śauceya had not acknowledged Uddālaka's authority, he would have lost face and risked losing his reputation.

Insler locates two types of situations in which one disputant threatens another that their head will shatter apart. The first kind is when the threat is made during the debate. Insler cites Yājñavalkya's threat to Gārgī in the debate at Janaka's court as an example.<sup>13</sup> The second type is illustrated by this *brahmodya* between Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śauceya Prācīnayogya.<sup>14</sup> In this category of *brahmodya* the winner of the argument warns the loser after the fact, saying that if they had not admitted ignorance or defeat that their head would have shattered apart. In both situations 'the parties involved lack the proper knowledge to continue the inquiry or the debate'.<sup>15</sup> In this case Śauceya would have lost his head if he had claimed to have knowledge that he did not have. Thus, Uddālaka's post facto warning suggests that Śauceya asks to become Uddālaka's student not only because he wants to learn what Uddālaka knows, but also because he recognises that if he had not obliged to become Uddālaka's student he would have lost his reputation.

In another dialogue from the ŚB, Uddālaka Āruṇi is driving around in his chariot as an invited priest in the northern country of Madras.<sup>16</sup> Like a number of Upaniṣadic teachers, Uddālaka is well traveled and has both taught and learned Upaniṣadic discourses throughout ancient north India.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the first thing Uddālaka does in the northern country is to offer a gold coin as a challenge to the local brahmins to a philosophical argument. The ŚB explains that in ancient times the gold

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<sup>13</sup> We will look at the exchange between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī both later in this chapter as well as in the fourth chapter.

<sup>14</sup> ŚB 11.5.3.13.

<sup>15</sup> Insler 1998/90: 98-99.

<sup>16</sup> ŚB 11.4.1.1-9.

<sup>17</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, 'driving about' (*dhāvayām cakāra*) suggests that Uddālaka was traveling around by chariot, which Bodewitz describes as the luxury car for the Vedic elite (Bodewitz 1974).

coin was used to invite rival priests to a philosophical debate: 'In the time of our forefathers a prize used to be offered by chosen priests when driving about, for the sake of calling out the timid to a disputation'.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that it was a common practice for brahmins like Uddālaka to travel around in their chariots and challenge local brahmins to disputes, with the gold coin illustrating the ritualised aspect of making such a challenge.

When he offers the coin, the brahmins are fearful that Uddālaka might take away their local authority. As Bodewitz points out: 'Being a stranger he is not welcome as a rival and always runs the risk of being challenged to a *brahmodya* in which his prestige ... will be at stake'.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the northern brahmins decide to challenge Uddālaka to a disputation as a way to protect their domain, electing Svaidāyana to represent them. Svaidāyana approaches him on his own and, after exchanging greetings, claims that although Uddālaka has been invited by a patron, he nevertheless needs to prove himself as superior to the local brahmins: 'He alone who knows ... is entitled to leave his home-country and go about as an invited (or free-lance) priest'.<sup>20</sup> Svaidāyana then repeats this phrase as a preface to each of his questions about the new and full moon sacrifices. Uddālaka is unable to answer any of the questions and finally responds to Svaidāyana's challenge by giving him the gold coin and praising him for his knowledge. This detail emphasises the formal aspects of the *brahmodya*. Uddālaka acknowledges that he has lost the debate, so he readily offers the gold coin to Svaidāyana. Bodewitz further suggests that Uddālaka accepts his defeat in his private debate with Svaidāyana in order to avoid facing him again in a

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<sup>18</sup> ŚB 11.4.1.9. Witzel points out that a gold coin is given in a similar dialogue in GB (1987: 367).

<sup>19</sup> Bodewitz 1974: 86.

<sup>20</sup> ŚB 11.4.1.4 (translation from Bodewitz 1974: 85).

public debate.<sup>21</sup> The narrative tells us that when Svaidāyana returns to the other brahmins he does not reveal to them that he defeated Uddālaka and won the gold coin. Thus, by admitting his defeat in private Uddālaka does not damage his reputation. The encounter between Uddālaka and Svaidāyana also brings up the threat of losing one's head. When Svaidāyana returns to the other brahmins and they ask about Uddālaka Āruṇi, he responds that anyone who dare challenge him will lose his head.<sup>22</sup> Once again Uddālaka is linked with this threat and we are reminded that both brahmins are risking their reputation throughout this debate.

After Uddālaka admits defeat, Svaidāyana responds by saying that he will teach him, but without initiating him as a student. This qualification is an important detail which figures in a number of dialogues that we will explore further in the next chapter. For now, however, it is important to distinguish this dialogue from the teacher/student dialogues that we explored last chapter. In the *upanayana* dialogues, where students approach teachers with firewood at the beginning of their discussion, it is always clear who is the teacher and who is the student. However, in this episode Uddālaka and Svaidāyana debate with each other first, and their encounter ends with Uddālaka asking to become his student. Indeed, one of the important features of the *brahmodyas* between two contestants is that the loser of the discussion asks to be the student of the victor after the argument. In these cases we see that the *brahmodya* serves as a negotiation process whereby brahmins establish their relative authority among each other.

Furthermore, Svaidāyana's victory over Uddālaka represents a victory for the northern brahmins over the orthodox priests from Kuru-Pañcāla. Whereas in many

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<sup>21</sup> Bodewitz 1974: 88.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, however, Svaidāyana does not reveal to them that he won the gold coin from Uddālaka.

dialogues Uddālaka's character functions as a foil to show the superior knowledge of important kings, in this dialogue Uddālaka is contrasted to the brahmins from the northern country. In this way, the debate between the two individual participants of Uddālaka and Svaidāyana also represents a regional dynamic that indicates that the north was becoming an important centre of Vedic learning.

These two dialogues with Uddālaka Āruṇi share a number of features that are characteristic of the private debate. The primary issue at stake in both episodes is personal authority. Uddālaka is cast as the senior brahmin who is challenged with a series of questions. In the first case he maintains his superiority by answering all the questions successfully, and consequently wins over a new student. In the second dialogue he cannot answer the questions so he becomes a student himself. In this case, Uddālaka does not explicitly lose his authority because the debate is in private and Svaidāyana does not reveal the outcome. Nevertheless, Svaidāyana establishes his own authority and has the gold coin to prove it. Thus, in both episodes the loser ends up being the student of the winner. Additionally, both dialogues show the contestants playing by the rules of the debate. Both losers readily accept defeat and ask to become the student of the winner.

#### **D. Yājñavalkya and the philosophical tournament:**

Whereas Uddālaka Āruṇi features in private debates, Yājñavalkya is the literary character most closely associated with the public *brahmodya*. Indeed, the emergence of Yājñavalkya as a literary character coincides with the development of the verbal contest as an important scenario in Upaniṣadic narrative. The *brahmodya* not only establishes Yājñavalkya as an authoritative figure, but also displays his knowledge as

new and unorthodox.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, narrative accounts of Yājñavalkya and his interlocutors highlight the competitive dynamics of verbal debate and describe a number of underhanded debating tactics. In this way, these accounts show that Yājñavalkya establishes his superiority as much by how he conducts his arguments as by the particular discourses that he knows.

Like Śaṇḍilya, in Yājñavalkya's first appearances in Vedic literature only his name is mentioned. He is presented as an authoritative figure who discusses the significance of ritual actions and is especially known for his expertise regarding the *agnihotra*.<sup>24</sup> His name appears on several occasions in the ŚB, but he is also mentioned in the SĀ, and in the JB he is known by the name Vājasaneyā, which reflects his connection to the Vājasaneyi *sākhā* of the White Yajurveda.<sup>25</sup> Fišer describes these quotations as '*ad hoc*' opinions about the sacrifice: They 'are concise, brisk and totally unrelated pronouncements made (supposedly) by Yājñavalkya either alone or in the company of a few fellow-priests. None of these *dicta* contain anything but his name'.<sup>26</sup>

Although these passages seem unrelated in content, they contribute to establishing one of Yājñavalkya's most distinctive character traits: his superiority in verbal debate. Admittedly, none of these passages are explicitly described as a *brahmodya*, nevertheless they are similar in that they present controversies about ritual practice as a discussion among specific individuals, with a preference for one view

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<sup>23</sup> The BU further portrays Yājñavalkya as an innovative and unconventional figure by the language used in the sections attributed to him. As Fišer has argued at length, the style of the Yājñavalkya sections is more innovative and a number of new words are coined: 'Yājñavalkya's individuality is documented by his language' (1984: 60-61).

<sup>24</sup> ŚB 11.3.1.8 Yājñavalkya teaches important substitutions in the *agnihotra* with Janaka. ŚB 11.6.2.1 Yājñavalkya discusses the *agnihotra* with Śvetaketu, Sātyayajñi and Janaka. ŚB 2.3.1.21; 12.4.1.10 Yājñavalkya is quoted as an expert about the *agnihotra*.

<sup>25</sup> SĀ 9.7 & 13.1; JB 1.19.23 & 2.76. In the ŚB he is only known as Yājñavalkya, whereas both names are used in the JB and BU.

<sup>26</sup> Fišer 1984: 57.

over the others. Although there is no narrative description of the debate, these scenes are already different from the ritually embedded exchanges where there are no names of specific individuals and, crucially, no winners or losers. In most cases, Yājñavalkya's views are presented in contrast to the opinions of other brahmins, and he clearly emerges as superior. As Fišer has argued, unless stated otherwise the text shows its preference for the views of Yājñavalkya by stating his words after those of his opponents.<sup>27</sup> For example, in a discussion about the offering of first fruits (*āgrayaneṣṭi*), Yājñavalkya is quoted directly after Kahoda Kauṣṭiki, indicating that Yājñavalkya's words are correct in contrast to the opinion of Kauṣṭiki. This case is a clear example of the superior brahmin who gets in the last word.

In another passage about the offering of the omenta (*vapānām homaḥ*), the ŚB casts Yājñavalkya in opposition to a number of other ritual specialists. Like later descriptions of the *brahmodya*, it presents the views of four different brahmins: Satyakāma Jābāla, Saumāpa Mānutantavyas, Śailāli Bhāllaveya and Indrota Śaunaka. After recounting the positions of each priest, the text tells us that these are not the accepted views: 'This, then, is what these have said, but the established practice is different therefrom'.<sup>28</sup> The text then contrasts these views to the superior position of Yājñavalkya.

In a discussion about eating and fasting, Yājñavalkya has different views from Aṣāḍha Sāvayasa and Barku Vārṣṇa.<sup>29</sup> In this passage Yājñavalkya's views are not presented last, but the text nevertheless makes it clear that his opinions are accepted.

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<sup>27</sup> As Fišer explains, 'In most cases the stock phrase "as to this/ point/ however, Yājñavalkya said" (*tad u hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ*) introduces a new idea that implies, at the same time, an objection to what was said immediately before' (Fišer 1984: 59). There is a similar episode where Yājñavalkya's views are presented in contrast to Saulvāyana's. In this case Yājñavalkya's views are again presented last and predicated by the same phrase *tad u hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ*.

<sup>28</sup> ŚB 13.5.3.5.

<sup>29</sup> ŚB 1.1.1.7-10.

In this case, it is Barku Varṣṇa's views that are stated last, but the text clearly rejects his opinions, stating explicitly that his instructions should not be followed.<sup>30</sup> In another example, there is a discussion about the pressing of *soma*.<sup>31</sup> Here Yājñavalkya's views are contrasted with those of Rāma Aupatasvini and Buḍila Āśvatarāśvi. Again, Yājñavalkya's argument is presented last and it is his opinion that is supported by the text. Interestingly, in this case Yājñavalkya appeals to the authority of a *ṛṣi* to substantiate his claim.<sup>32</sup>

Although these examples are not formally *brahmodyas*, they are descriptions of debates among brahmins where there is a clear winner to the argument. Thus, even before the more detailed accounts of the philosophical tournament, Yājñavalkya is already associated with disputes against other brahmins. This is different from Śāṇḍilya, for example, who is usually mentioned individually or in the context of teaching a specific student. In the six times Śāṇḍilya is mentioned in the ŚB, his opinions are never presented in a *brahmodya*-like format.<sup>33</sup> Thus, even when there are few narrative details Śāṇḍilya is portrayed as a teacher, while Yājñavalkya is mainly depicted as a disputant in philosophical debates.<sup>34</sup>

By the time of the BU, Yājñavalkya had become known as the founder of the Yajurvedic school and the author of parts of the ŚB, as well as the BU itself.<sup>35</sup> The examples of his verbal exchanges in this section have shown that even before he

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<sup>30</sup> ŚB 1.1.1.10.

<sup>31</sup> ŚB 4.6.1.

<sup>32</sup> In the Brāhmaṇas, attributing views to a *ṛṣi* was often a way of quoting the R̥gveda.

<sup>33</sup> ŚB 7.5.2.43 (he is quoted and no one else is mentioned); 9.4.4.17 (he teaches the Katīyas); 9.5.2.15 (Śāṇḍilya quotes Tura Kāvaśya); 10.1.4.11 (He disputes with his student. Although this exchange is contentious, this dialogue is presented as a teacher/student dialogue); 10.6.3.2 (Śāṇḍilya teaches about *ātman*).

<sup>34</sup> In fact, the compilation of the ŚB suggests a personal rivalry between Śāṇḍilya and Yājñavalkya. While Yājñavalkya is mentioned more than anyone else in the ŚB, his appearances are almost entirely limited to the sections of the text ascribed to him. In sections six through nine, attributed to Śāṇḍilya, Yājñavalkya is not mentioned at all.

<sup>35</sup> BU 6.5.3.

achieved the authoritative status as depicted in the BU, Yājñavalkya was known for his ability to defeat other brahmins in debate. In the BU, Yājñavalkya is featured in two *brahmodyas*, both of which take place in King Janaka's court. In the first episode, which is one of the most well-known scenes in Upaniṣadic literature, Yājñavalkya is challenged by seven brahmins from the Kuru-Pañcāla region. We will look at this *brahmodya* in more detail in the following three sections as we explore the significance of the participants, the tactics they employ and the dramatic conclusion featured in this debate.<sup>36</sup>

The other *brahmodya* in the BU that involves Yājñavalkya is presented differently from accounts of other verbal disputes in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. In this case, Yājñavalkya does not debate with his opponents directly, but rather counters the claims of other brahmins through Janaka's re-telling of their arguments. Interestingly, this scenario is similar to a philosophical debate in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, where King Ajātasattu presents to the Buddha the views of six of his philosophical rivals.<sup>37</sup> In this case the participants are: Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambala, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta and Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta. In both the Upaniṣadic and Buddhist accounts, there is a similar literary paradigm at work. In the BU, the views of six brahmins are summarised by King Janaka and then refuted by the authoritative teacher Yājñavalkya; in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, six rival positions are summarised by King Ajatasatru and then refuted by the authoritative teacher Guatama Buddha. This similarity between the Upaniṣadic and Buddhist presentation of philosophical debates indicates that the *brahmodya* became

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<sup>36</sup> Grinshpon interprets this tournament as describing Yājñavalkya's 'self-transformation from a person who does not know into a sage who does' (1998:381). Although an interesting reading, this *brahmodya*, as we will see, seems to be much more about how Yājñavalkya uses his knowledge, rather than about what he learns during the process of the debate. In fact, this is an important difference which distinguishes the *brahmodya* from the *upanayana*, which does describe the learning process.

<sup>37</sup> DN 2.



an important literary convention for presenting knowledge. The literary presentation of the *brahmodya* is significant because the narrative details of these scenes are what distinguish them from the scripted exchanges that were nested within the Vedic ritual. More than merely serving as a narrative frame to record different teachings and opinions about the ritual, the literary details of the *brahmodya* highlight the social and interactive character of debate. In the following sections we will examine the dynamics of the public debate, especially those in which Yājñavalkya participates, and identify three prominent literary features that develop both the personal and political implications of the *brahmodya*: 1) the identity of the individual participants 2) the debating tactics the participants employ 3) the meaning and implications of the threat of head shattering.

#### **E. Yājñavalkya's interlocutors: the social and political implications of debate**

In his study of verbal disputes in Homeric and Old English epic literature, Ward Parks has commented on the importance of the individuals who participate in narrative accounts of debate: 'The true subject of any verbal context is the contestants themselves; that this presupposition is embedded in the basic structure of the contests is borne out by the range of defensive or belligerent stances frequently adopted by the debators even when they are purportedly engaged in a "purely intellectual inquiry"'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the Upaniṣadic accounts of the *brahmodya* often emphasise the characters and their interactions with each other, as much as the discourses that they articulate. Nowhere is this more the case than in the well-known philosophical tournament in Janaka's court. In this episode, Yājñavalkya and his opponents not only articulate opposing philosophical claims about the world, but also represent opposing political

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<sup>38</sup> Parks 1990: 166.

and cultural alliances. This aspect of the debate can be seen when we examine more closely the particular brahmins that Yājñavalkya argues against. Yājñavalkya's interlocutors represent personal and textual rivals, as well as play out political and regional conflicts. Additionally, in this section we will observe how a number of the same characters re-appear as contestants in these verbal disputes.

All of Yājñavalkya's opponents are from the western, Kuru-Pañcāla region and all are representatives of the Ṛgvedic or Black Yajurvedic schools. Yājñavalkya's first opponent, the *hotṛ* priest Aśvala, is also a court brahmin of King Janaka. His name suggests that he is a member of the Āśvalāyana family, which is associated with the composition of a number of Vedic texts. In addition to the Āśvalāyana recension of the Ṛgveda, there are the Āśvalāyana Gṛhya and Śrauta Sūtras. Another opponent, Kahola Kauṣītaki, is the reputed author of the Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad. Yājñavalkya's final challenger, Videgdha Śākalya, has been ascribed authorship of the Padapāṭha of the Ṛgveda, which is the final editing of the Ṛgveda as we have it today. Not only is there a general connection between political power and Vedic schools, but the presence of these particular brahmins indicates that there is a specific rivalry between the Yajurveda and the Ṛgveda.<sup>39</sup> That both the political rivalries and canonical debates are linked together in the same event suggests a close connection between regional superiority and a courtly association with a particular Vedic school. Additionally, the presence of these specific opponents suggests that there was a close association between those who composed Vedic texts and those who had direct contact with the king. In the Upaniṣads, brahmins are not depicted as conductors of the sacrifice, but rather as important figures in the king's court.

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<sup>39</sup> Witzel suggests that 'there may have been a sudden movement of the Aitareyas towards the east'. That the Ṛgveda had an established presence in Videha is suggested by the fact that the only priest other than Yājñavalkya who is specifically associated with Janaka is the *hotṛ* priest Aśvala (Witzel 1987: 404).

Importantly, a number of Yājñavalkya's rivals in this debate also appear in other accounts of verbal contests. Of the eight challengers in Janaka's court, three of them appear in other *brahmodyas* with Yājñavalkya: Kahola Kauṣītakeya, Uddālaka Āruṇi and Vidagdha Śākalya. As we have seen, Kahola Kauṣītakeya has opposing views to those of Yājñavalkya in the ŚB, while Vidagdha Śākalya's appears as a rival to Yājñavalkya in another *brahmodya* in the BU.<sup>40</sup>

Uddālaka Āruṇi is of particular importance because he is closely connected to Yājñavalkya and his status as superior to Yājñavalkya highlights the dramatic effect of his participation in the debate in Janaka's court. The final genealogy in the BU states that Uddālaka is Yājñavalkya's teacher, and in most dialogues where they appear together Uddālaka is presented as the senior, and in some cases, the superior, of the two. For example, in one passage in the ŚB Yājñavalkya reports that Uddālaka once bewitched Bhadrasena Ājātaśatruva.<sup>41</sup> Here, there is no indication that Uddālaka instructed him, but the fact that Yājñavalkya reports Uddālaka's opinion suggests a hierarchical relationship. Another passage that places Uddālaka in a superior position concerns what to do if the cow in the *agnihotra* lies down while being milked.<sup>42</sup> After stating Yājñavalkya's point of view, the text concludes with the words of Āruṇi. As we have seen, unless specifically stated otherwise, the brahmin who speaks last is usually presented as the most authoritative. Uddālaka's characterisation as superior to Yājñavalkya from these other debating episodes adds to the significance of Yājñavalkya defeating him on this occasion in Janaka's court.

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<sup>40</sup> Kauṣītaki appears in the ŚB, although here his name appears as Kahoḷa Kauṣītaki (ŚB 2.4.3.1); Vidagdha appears in a second *brahmodya* in the BU (4.1.7).

<sup>41</sup> Bhadrasena Ājātaśatruva does not appear anywhere else in Vedic literature. Eggeling speculates that he was the son of King Ajātaśatru (Eggeling III.141).

<sup>42</sup> ŚB 12.4.1.9-11. Also JB 1.58-9. Interestingly, the JB version of this discussion does not mention Uddālaka Āruṇi. See Bodewitz for further discussion (1973: 183).

Uddālaka Āruṇi also appears together with Yājñavalkya in an account of a different *brahmodya* in the presence of Janaka which appears in the JB. In this account, five great brahmins approach King Janaka for a teaching about the *agnihotra*: Uddālaka Āruṇi, Yājñavalkya, Barku Vārṣṇa, Priya Anaśruteya and Buḍila Āśvatarāśvi Vaiyāghrapadya.<sup>43</sup> In addition to Uddālaka Āruṇi, Barku Vārṣṇa is also a regular opponent of Yājñavalkya who is quoted in the ŚB as having a contrasting opinion about whether or not the *yajamāna* should fast after performing the *agnihotra*.<sup>44</sup> Later in the dialogue in the JB he is addressed as Agniveśya, a name that appears in two of the genealogies in the BU. Buḍila Āśvatarāśvi is another regular participant in the *brahmodya*, as in the CU he appears with Uddālaka Āruṇi as one of the five wealthy householders who discusses *ātman*.<sup>45</sup> However, this is the only debate where he is an opponent of Yājñavalkya.

We see some familiar names again in the *brahmodya* where Janaka reports the views of six brahmins to Yājñavalkya. The brahmins whose views Janaka recounts are: Jitvan Śailini, Udaṅka Śaulbāyana, Barku Vārṣṇa, Gardhabhīvipīta Bhāradvāja, Satyakāma Jābāla and Vidagdha Śākalya. In addition to Barku Vārṣṇa, Vidagdha Śākalya is once again cast as an opponent to Yājñavalkya, and similar to how he appears in Janaka's well-known tournament, in this case he is again presented as Yājñavalkya's final opponent. Satyakāma Jābāla, who also features in this debate, is one of the most prominent brahmins in the CU and his personal rivalry with Yājñavalkya will be explored further in the final section of this chapter. Thus, in this episode, three of the six opponents are known rivals of Yājñavalkya.

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<sup>43</sup> JB 1.22-25. In this case Uddālaka's name only appears as Āruṇi, yet he is addressed as Guatama. Yājñavalkya is referred to as Vājasaneyā.

<sup>44</sup> ŚB 1.1.1.10.

<sup>45</sup> CU 5.11.1 & 5.11.16. Also he appears in the ŚB (10.6.1.7) and as a student of Janaka in the BU (5.14.8).

As we have seen, this *brahmodya* is also notable because it is different in style from other debates featured in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, yet similar to a debate featuring the Buddha in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta. Not only is there a similarity in presentation, as in both cases the rival positions are reported by the king, but also the Buddhist account places a similar emphasis on the individual participants. All the Buddha's rivals represent opposing religio-philosophical schools, most notably Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (the name given throughout the Pāli Canon to refer to Vardhamāna Mahāvīra) who is known as the founder of Jainism and Makhali Gosāla who is known as the founder of the Ājīvikas. It is well known that the Jains and Ājīvikas not only had different doctrinal positions from the Buddhists, but they also competed with the Buddhists for the patronage of kings.<sup>46</sup> Thus, like the Upaniṣadic *brahmodyas*, the Buddhists texts use the literary description of debate to play out political and social rivalries.

In this section we have looked at the importance of the individual participants who appear in the *brahmodyas*. In both the tournament in King Janaka's court, as well as the example from the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, we have seen that many individuals represent specific regions or philosophical schools. In these cases the public debate is not merely a contest about philosophy, but also has political implications. Additionally, we have seen that a number of the same characters make several appearances as Yājñavalkya's rivals. Some of these individuals, like Satyakāma and Uddālaka Āruṇi, we know from other episodes, and thus are able understand, at least to a certain extent, the implications of their particular rivalry with Yājñavalkya. Other

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<sup>46</sup> The Jain sources claim that Chandragupta Maurya, the first Mauryan emperor, was a patron of the Jains and that he converted to Jainism towards the end of his life by giving up the throne and joining a monastery. His son, Bindusāra, is associated with the Ājīvikas, but is thought to have patronised brahmins as well as Parivrājakas (religious wanderers). Aśoka, who is known to have favoured the Buddhists, also supported the Ājīvikas and Jains. See Thapar 2002: 164-5; 1994: 11-25. Also see Basham (1951) for the doctrinal differences between the Buddhists, Jains and Ājīvikas.

figures, like Bhadrasena Ājātaśatrapa, do not appear anywhere else in the surviving literature, thus leaving us without the ability to interpret the significance of their particular presence. Nevertheless, taken together Yājñavalkya's interlocutors, as well as the figure of Yājñavalkya himself, indicate that the identity of the individual participants play an important role in the literary presentations of the *brahmodya*. In addition to linking these verbal disputes to external rivalries, the individual identities of the characters also personalise these exchanges. As highlighted by the head shattering motif, brahmins do not merely challenge each other's views, but question each other's personal authority.

#### **F. Yājñavalkya and the tactics of debate:**

In addition to the specific individuals whom he opposes, these descriptions of the *brahmodya* also emphasise how Yājñavalkya wins his arguments. As we will see, Yājñavalkya's authority not only stems from his knowledge, but also from how he uses his knowledge in the context of debate. Yājñavalkya's tactical approach to verbal exchanges is closely connected to his unorthodox persona. This aspect of Yājñavalkya's character is present in some of his earliest appearances in the ŚB, even in passages where his view are not supported by the text. As Fišer observes: 'In spite of Yājñavalkya's doubtless fame and contrary to the current belief that his authority was conclusive, the texts show a variety of opinions. His views are, in fact, sometimes challenged, at other times doubted, and once or twice even rebuked'.<sup>47</sup> In one passage about Prajāpati's original creation, Yājñavalkya states that Prajāpati created two kinds of creatures, but the text disagrees and cites the views of ancient ṛṣis that there are

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<sup>47</sup> Fišer 1984: 57-8.

three kinds of creatures.<sup>48</sup> In another example, the text cites Yājñavalkya's opinion about the *āgnīdhṛīya* fire. After stating his view, the ŚB relates: 'This now is one way. Then there is this second'.<sup>49</sup> On another occasion, in a discussion about the two cups of *soma* juice (*grahau*), the text quotes Yājñavalkya, but questions his opinion, suggesting that his views are too speculative: 'Also Yājñavalkya said, "Should we not rather draw them for the deities, since that is, as it were, the sign of conquest?"' In this, however, he merely speculated, but he did not practice it'.<sup>50</sup> This passage is one of the first indications that Yājñavalkya's knowledge is unconventional.

In fact, throughout the ŚB, Yājñavalkya's opinions emphasise newer, Upaniṣadic ideals over and above orthodox opinions about the ritual. For example, on one occasion Yājñavalkya expresses the view that the brahmins themselves are the most important aspect of performing a sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> Yājñavalkya recounts that when he, along with other priests, were choosing a place to conduct a sacrifice for Vārṣṇa, Sātyayajña expressed that wherever there are brahmins who have studied, are learned and wise, that is a place appropriate for sacrifice. Here Yājñavalkya emphasises that the individual participants are more important than the ritual actions themselves. This point of view anticipates one of the primary assumptions of Upaniṣadic discourse: that the authority of a particular teaching is vested within the person who articulates the teaching.

Although the ŚB depicts Yājñavalkya as an innovative thinker, his views are primarily about the ritual. Yet, whereas in the ŚB he is presented as an expert on the *agnihotra*, in the Upaniṣads he generally rejects traditional ritualistic arguments that

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<sup>48</sup> ŚB 2.5.1.2.

<sup>49</sup> ŚB 4.6.8.7. Fišer points out that of the three occasions where Yājñavalkya is quoted in the fourth book of the ŚB, twice his views are cast into doubt (1984: 69).

<sup>50</sup> ŚB 4.2.1.7.

<sup>51</sup> ŚB 3.1.1.4-5.

are based on homologies and etymologies. Rather, like a number of Upaniṣadic teachers, he focuses on teachings of the self, developing themes like how the *prāṇas* function in the body, how to overcome death and the immortality of *ātman*. Importantly, the public *brahmodya*, as well as his private conversations with King Janaka, serve as a forum for him to articulate some of his most characteristic discourses. For example, in one of his dialogues with Janaka, his teaching begins when the king asks him to discuss where people go when they leave the world.<sup>52</sup> During his instruction he talks about the *prāṇas* and he characteristically defines *ātman* by means of negation: ‘About this self (*ātman*), one can only say “not---, not---” He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not the subject of decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury’.<sup>53</sup> In the second version of his dialogue with his wife Maitreyī, Yājñavalkya imparts a similar discourse, where he again defines *ātman* by means of negation. Additionally, in Janaka’s *brahmodya*, Yājñavalkya gives a version of the same discourse when arguing with Uddālaka and Gārgī. As we have seen, discourses about *ātman* are often presented in direct opposition to knowledge about the sacrifice.

However, the narrative accounts of the *brahmodyas* not only present Yājñavalkya as familiar with these teachings, but also emphasise how he uses his knowledge to debate against other brahmins. Like Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, Yājñavalkya does not always win because of the logic of his arguments or his overall knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Rather, Yājñavalkya claims his authority as much by how he makes his

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<sup>52</sup> BU 4.2.1.

<sup>53</sup> BU 4.2.4.

<sup>54</sup> That Yājñavalkya wins his arguments by means other than his philosophical knowledge, is similar in a number of ways to Socrates who does not always win arguments according to their logical



arguments, and by how he employs other means, like humour, insult and intimidation, to silence his opponents. Also similar to Socrates, he does not always initially give his best answer to the questions put to him, but only reveals his more important discourses when he is threatened by his opponents. In the following examples, we will see that Yājñavalkya's knowledge is not merely to be found in the consistency of his discourse, but also in his ability to out-talk his opponents. In this way, Yājñavalkya's knowledge is often characterised as both situational and tactical.

One example of how Yājñavalkya offers his knowledge in a discriminating way is in his exchange with Jāratkāra Ārtabhāga, the second rival to question him in Janaka's philosophical tournament. After asking Yājñavalkya about graspers (*graha*) and over-graspers (*atigraha*), Ārtabhāga begins to ask Yājñavalkya questions about the nature of death.<sup>55</sup> One of the questions that Ārtabhāga poses is whether the *prāṇās* depart from a man when he dies. Yājñavalkya answers that they do not, explaining that the breaths 'accumulate within this very body, causing it to swell up and to become bloated. So a dead man lies bloated (*ādhmāto*)'.<sup>56</sup> Importantly, this answer contradicts one of Yājñavalkya's own teachings to Janaka.<sup>57</sup> Later in the BU when Yājñavalkya is instructing Janaka he says: 'As he is departing his lifebreath (*prāṇa*) departs with him. And as his lifebreath departs, all his vital functions (*prāṇā*) depart with it'.<sup>58</sup> Admittedly, it is possible that this contradiction has more to do with the editorial process of compiling the BU, rather than an inconsistency in Yājñavalkya's

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consistency. Many of Socrates's arguments are 'fallacious or unsound' (Beversluis 2000). Or as Vlastos points out: Socrates 'wins every argument, but never manages to win over an opponent' (1971: 2).

<sup>55</sup> Olivelle points out that these terms have a double meaning in this passage: 'Within the ritual, *graha* refers to cup used to draw out Soma and *atigraha* refers to the offering of extra cupfuls of Soma. Within the context of the body, *graha* is a sense organ and *atigraha* is the sense object grasped by it. The passage attempts to show how the grasper itself is grasped by what it grasps, i.e. the sense object' (Olivelle 1996: 309 n.).

<sup>56</sup> BU 3.2.11.

<sup>57</sup> Additionally, this teaching is different from those given by other Upaniṣadic teachers. Both Ajātasatru and Prajāpati give teachings that suggest that the breaths do depart from the body at the time of death.

<sup>58</sup> BU 4.4.2.

viewpoints. However, it is also possible to interpret this as a debating tactic of Yājñavalkya, because throughout this exchange he is reluctant to share his knowledge with Ārtabhāga in public. In his final question Ārtabhāga returns to his earlier question: ‘When a man has died, and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters, his physical body into the earth, his self (*ātman*) into space... then what happens to that person’.<sup>59</sup> To this question Yājñavalkya does not answer, but rather replies, ‘My friend, we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Ārtabhāga, let’s go discuss this in private’.<sup>60</sup>

This is a curious response for a number of reasons. One possible explanation why Yājñavalkya cannot discuss this in public is because he has not fooled Ārtabhāga with his first answer and does not want to contradict himself in public. As we have seen in Prajāpati’s instruction to Indra, sometimes teachers would willfully teach an untrue doctrine to test the knowledge and humility of their students. Or, as we will see, Yājñavalkya does not always reveal his best answer at the beginning of his response. Considering that Yājñavalkya has different views on this subject in another dialogue, it is quite possible that Ārtabhāga has caught Yājñavalkya in a contradiction.

Another important detail is that Yājñavalkya takes Ārtabhāga’s hand as they go outside. As we have seen, this is an important gesture in the *upanayana* and the dialogues between teachers and students.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that Yājñavalkya will only discuss these matters with Ārtabhāga after he has formally initiated him as a student. In any case, it is curious that Yājñavalkya does not directly or publicly answer

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<sup>59</sup> BU 3.2.13.

<sup>60</sup> BU 3.2.13.

<sup>61</sup> In the *upanayana* in the ŚB, the teacher takes the student by the right hand (ŚB 11.5.4.12). Also Ajātaśatru takes Dṛpta-Bālāki by the hand when he receives him as a student (BU 2.1.15).

Ārtabhāga's question. As Yājñavalkya ushers his opponent to a private location, it is clear that Yājñavalkya employs unusual debating methods to silence Ārtabhāga. As we will see, the possibility that Yājñavalkya is not playing by the rules of debate is further implied in his exchanges with Uṣasta Cākrāyana and Kahola Kauṣītakeya.

In addition to his sense of when to reveal and when to with-hold his most important doctrines, Yājñavalkya makes use of humour to unsettle his opponents. Not only does Yājñavalkya make a number of witty remarks, but he employs his wit as a debating tactic in philosophical arguments. Witzel explains that 'he usually will give an unexpected, quick and undefeatable answer'.<sup>62</sup> One example of his use of humour in a debate occurs in the ŚB when he is cursed by a group of wandering priests for following the ritual procedure of basting the omentum before the ghee. The priests warn him that if he does not perform the sacrifice according to their method that his breaths will leave his body. In response, Yājñavalkya points to his gray haired arms and says: '...these old arms – what in the world has become of that Brahmin's words!'<sup>63</sup> In this case, rather than oppose the *advaryu* priests through argumentation, Yājñavalkya makes a joke about his gray hair on his arms, suggesting that since he has lived to be an old man already, the words of the priests cannot be correct. Similarly, in a passage about what an *advaryu* priest can eat during the sacrifice, the text warns against eating the flesh of a cow or an ox. In fact, the ŚB states that if one eats this meat he is likely to be born as a strange being.<sup>64</sup> However, Yājñavalkya responds that he will eat the meat, provided that it tastes good.<sup>65</sup> Once again, rather than answer with an opinion based on traditional discourse, Yājñavalkya retorts with a humorous

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<sup>62</sup> Witzel 1987: 400.

<sup>63</sup> ŚB 3.8.2.25.

<sup>64</sup> ŚB 3.1.2.21.

<sup>65</sup> Eggeling translates *aṃsala* as 'tender'. Fišer offers 'juicy' or 'fleshy' (1984: 69).

remark, indicating a more pragmatic approach to ritual.<sup>66</sup> As we will see in the debate in Janaka's court, Yājñavalkya uses his humour on a number of occasions to literally out-wit his opponents.

Another example of his humour is at the beginning of the debate at Janaka's court, when he attempts to unsettle his opponents before the debate even formally begins. When the brahmins gather in the presence of Janaka, the king challenges the most learned among them (*brahmiṣṭha*) to drive away one thousand cows, each with ten pieces of gold tied around their horns.<sup>67</sup> Before any discussion takes place, however, Yājñavalkya claims to be the most learned and instructs his pupil to take the cows and gold.<sup>68</sup> Thus, quite audaciously, Yājñavalkya shows his lack of respect for the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins. In response, Aśvala, Janaka's *hotṛ* priest, questions Yājñavalkya's claim to be the most learned among them. Yājñavalkya sarcastically replies: 'We bow humbly to the most learned man. We just want the cows.'<sup>69</sup> Again, rather than defend his claim through argumentation, Yājñavalkya displays his wit and sarcasm. It is this remark which provokes Aśvala to challenge Yājñavalkya to a series of questions. Indeed, this entire *brahmodya* is a series of challenges by the Kuru-Pañcāla priests to Yājñavalkya's claim of pre-eminence among them. Accordingly, this initial incident sets the competitive tone for the subsequent philosophical discussion. By claiming to be the most knowledgeable, Yājñavalkya puts himself in

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<sup>66</sup> I would like to thank my friend and colleague Steven Lindquist for suggesting this interpretation to this passage (personal communication).

<sup>67</sup> BU 3.1.1-2. This *brahmodya* is based on a similar episode in the ŚB which also takes place in Janaka's court and features both Yājñavalkya and Śākalya. However, in the ŚB Śākalya is the only challenger. Similar to Svaidāyana he debates with Yājñavalkya on the behalf of a number of other brahmins (ŚB 11.6.3.1-11). Also there is a similar account in JB 2.76-77.

<sup>68</sup> It is interesting that in the ŚB version there is no mention of Sāmaśravas, Yājñavalkya's student (ŚB 11.6.3.2). His name suggests that he is connected to the Sāmaveda. This is the only occasion where Yājñavalkya is depicted as having a student. And his very brief appearance illustrates that Yājñavalkya is much more known for his participations in debates than he is as a teacher. That Yājñavalkya asks Sāmaśravas to drive away the cows is not surprising, as we saw in the previous chapter that taking care of a teacher's cows was an important duty for students of Upaniṣadic discourse.

<sup>69</sup> BU 3.1.2.

the position of having to defend himself. All the other brahmins ask questions while Yājñavalkya proves himself by displaying his ability to answer them. Yājñavalkya does not ask any questions himself until the climax when he goes on the offensive and interrogates Śākalya.

In addition to his use of humour, one of the recurring aspects of Yājñavalkya's debating style, especially with the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins, is that he does not completely play by the rules. This is suggested by both Uṣasta Cākrāyana and Kahola Kauṣītakeya. Uṣasta Cākrāyana, the fourth brahmin to interrogate Yājñavalkya, shows the first signs of dissatisfaction with Yājñavalkya's methods. Uṣasta begins his challenge with a criticism, asking Yājñavalkya to answer him in such a way that is understandable and not too esoteric: 'Yājñavalkya ... explain to me the *brahman* that is plain and not cryptic, of the self (*ātman*) that is within all'.<sup>70</sup> Yājñavalkya responds that the self of the three breaths is the self within all. However, Uṣasta is unhappy with this explanation and demands a real explanation that is plain and not cryptic. In fact, Uṣasta further shows that he is not satisfied with Yājñavalkya's answer by sarcastically replying to Yājñavalkya's responses: 'That's a fine explanation. It's like saying "this is a cow and that is a horse"'.<sup>71</sup> He then demands again, 'Come on, give me a real explanation of the *brahman* that is plain and not cryptic'.<sup>72</sup> As Thompson has pointed out, speaking in an esoteric language is an important characteristic of debates in a *brahmodya*. *Brahmodyas* are often presented in an esoteric, poetic language that can only be understood by the initiated, and as we have seen, this kind of mystical rhetoric is an aspect of both the Agnirahasya and the Āraṇyakas.<sup>73</sup> In this

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<sup>70</sup> BU 3.4.1.

<sup>71</sup> BU 3.4.2. Olivelle interprets Uṣasta's remark as a sign of dissatisfaction and sarcasm (1996: 310 n.).

<sup>72</sup> BU 3.4.2.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson 1997: 15.

way, speaking in an esoteric language is one of the ways Yājñavalkya demonstrates his superiority in Upaniṣadic discourse. However, in this context Uṣasta, and later Kauṣītakeya, suggests that Yājñavalkya is employing mystical language as a means of evading his questions.

Additionally, Uṣasta's sarcasm foreshadows Gārgī's mocking criticism of Yājñavalkya later in the debate. Like Gārgī does later, Uṣasta asks the same question twice, further suggesting that Uṣasti is not satisfied with the quality of Yājñavalkya's answers. Yājñavalkya ultimately answers that the self cannot be known through the senses because it is the one doing the sensing. Because the *ātman* is always the perceiving subject, it can never be an object of thought or perception. This response is consistent with Yājñavalkya's discourses about *ātman* that he articulates to Uddālaka Āruṇi and Janaka. Thus, it is only after Uṣasta's persistent questioning that Yājñavalkya discloses his real answer.

Kahola Kauṣītakeya, the next one to challenge Yājñavalkya's authority, also accuses him of not giving direct answers. Like Uṣasta, he asks Yājñavalkya to explain the *brahman* which is plain and not cryptic. Additionally, Kauṣītakeya repeats the same question that Uṣasta has already asked twice. This is important because it shows that the dramatic tension of the *brahmodya* is developing as the discussion progresses. The Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins are clearly not happy with Yājñavalkya's answers, so they continue to ask the same questions and accuse Yājñavalkya of not being straight with his answers. In these cases, Yājñavalkya's cryptic answers do not necessarily suggest that he is a charlatan who does not know what he is talking about, but certainly these instances show that his interlocutors doubt his methods, if not also his knowledge

In the previous two sections we have seen that the narrative accounts of philosophical debates connect knowledge to specific individuals, describe the

*brahmodya* as a social practice and outline the modes of conduct by which a debate is conducted. In a number of dialogues it is not only what is said that is important, but also who speaks and how they advance their arguments: debating tactics are recorded as much as the truth claims of the contestants. As Witzel observes, ‘... the texts speak about a set of rules of discussions, rules of challenge and defeat’.<sup>74</sup> Every dialogue represents a particular event in the formal framework of debating, recording the rules of the *brahmodya*, as well as pointing out possible tactics. Yājñavalkya, for example, does not necessarily win because of his wisdom, but because he knows the rules of the game, and how to break them. He knows how to convince people through his timing, humour, cryptic remarks, and as we shall see, intimidation and threats.

**G. Losing face or losing one’s head? The trope of head shattering:**

Certainly, the most curious aspect of the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya* is the threat of the shattering head. This phrase appears in almost every significant *brahmodya*, both public and private, and is thus an important characteristic of these exchanges. Additionally, this threat is one of the elements of the *brahmodya* that distinguishes these exchanges from dialogues between teachers and students, as well as dialogues between brahmins and kings. Whether this warning represents the loss of face or the curse of death, these words are employed as a threat to silence opponents and clearly point to the highly competitive character of these exchanges between brahmins. However, what this phrase actually means and its implications for the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya* are contested issues among scholars.

As we have seen, this phrase occurs a number of times in the ŚB and tends to appear in debates that feature Uddālaka Āruṇi. It also occurs several times in the BU

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<sup>74</sup> Witzel (1987: 373).

and CU where it is most often expressed when one individual doubts the knowledge or philosophical claims of another.<sup>75</sup> Brahmadatta Caikitāneya says this when he threatens Ayāśya Āṅgīrasa that King Soma may make his head shatter apart if he does not sing the *udgītha* correctly.<sup>76</sup> In the CU, Śīlaka Śālāvatya accuses Caikitāyana Dālbhya of having an understanding of the *saman* which lacks foundation and threatens that if he continues to make such claims of knowledge that he will lose his head.<sup>77</sup> Not all of these occasions are within the context of a *brahmodya*, but this curse is generally associated with discourses about the significance of Vedic rituals rather than the performance of the ritual itself.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Insler has argued that the threat of head shattering did not originate from incorrect performance of ritual actions but rather developed within the context of philosophical discussions: 'It's original application concerned only theological discussions and debates'.<sup>79</sup> This is an important observation because it suggests that this curse developed along with the emergence of the literary presentation of the *brahmodya*. The appearance of the threat of head shattering in these dialogues is significant because it is used to portray a tense atmosphere for philosophical discussions. Brahmin composers employ this trope as a means to characterise participants as not merely stating different ontological claims about the world, but actually risking much more with their competing discourses. But what exactly are they risking? Their reputations, or their lives?

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<sup>75</sup> Witzel (1987: 375) argues that there are three conditions for the splitting of the head during a philosophical debate: 1) insufficient knowledge and lack of admission of this 2) perpetration of forbidden actions 3) asking a forbidden question. Insler points out that this is one of just two occasions where this threat is used in response to improper ritual procedure (the other is at ŚB 3.6.1.23). Rather than head shattering, the usual threats for not performing the ritual correctly are the ruin or death of the sacrificer and his family (Insler 1989/90: 100).

<sup>76</sup> BU 1.3.24.

<sup>77</sup> CU 1.8.1-8.

<sup>78</sup> Although there are exceptions to this. Insler (1989/90: 101), however, agrees that although these instances are not all *brahmodyas*, the topics are 'phrased in this narrative with the prevalent terminology of theological disputes'.

<sup>79</sup> Insler (1989/90: 102).



As we mentioned earlier, the two scholars who have most thoroughly pursued this issue are Witzel and Insler. Witzel's arguments begin from a philological premise: the phrase *mūrdha vi pat* has been mistranslated as 'the head flies off' when it should be rendered as 'the head flies apart' or 'the head bursts'.<sup>80</sup> Based on this literal rendering, Witzel concludes that passages containing this phrase imply a real threat of death. To further support this reading, Witzel cites a number of examples from other contexts where this phrase strongly suggests a literal reading. Two of these examples are worth mentioning, because both of them are significant to Insler's counterargument.

The first example comes from the Ambaṭṭa Sutta in the Pāli Canon. In this scene, Ambaṭṭa poses as a brahmin, when in fact he descends from a slave girl. The Buddha demands to know the truth of Ambaṭṭa's ancestry, warning him that if he does not answer his question after three requests, Ambaṭṭa's head will split into seven pieces.<sup>81</sup> At this moment, Vajirapāṇi, a Yakkha (Yakṣa) appears with a large hammer, hovering in the air above Ambaṭṭa. The Yakṣa thinks to himself: 'If this young man Ambaṭṭa does not answer a proper question put to him by the Blessed Lord by the third time of asking, I'll split his head into seven pieces'.<sup>82</sup> Upon seeing the Yakkha, Ambaṭṭa answers the Buddha's question. In this case, as Witzel observes, head shattering constitutes a real threat, as Ambaṭṭa answers the Buddha's question because he actually sees the Yakṣa ready to strike him with a hammer.<sup>83</sup> Thus, Ambaṭṭa is not merely worried about his reputation, but in fact his very survival.

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<sup>80</sup> Witzel (1987: 364). Both Hume and Radhakrishnan translate this phrase as the 'head will fall off'; Roebuck's rendering is 'your head will split apart'; Olivelle's translation is 'your head will shatter apart'.

<sup>81</sup> DN 3.1.20 (*sattadhā muddhā phalissati*).

<sup>82</sup> DN 3.1.21

<sup>83</sup> 'And at the sight, Ambaṭṭa was terrified and unnerved, his hairs stood on end, and he sought protection, shelter and safety from the Lord' (DN 3.1.21).

Witzel also cites the story of Yavakrī, who was about to sleep with an Apsarā, when a Gandharva appears with a metal hammer.<sup>84</sup> As a punishment, the Gandharva demands that Yavakrī cut off the heads of all the animals in the surrounding area. Before completing the slaughter, however, Yavakrī himself is killed by a deaf carpenter or woodsman. Curiously, the text states that when the other animals woke up, they assumed that Yavakrī had been killed by the Gandharva. Although Yavakrī's death is not actually brought about by the Gandharva's blow, this story, like the Buddhist example, suggests that head shattering is a literal act that is conducted with a hammer. Witzel concludes from these examples, as well as others: 'Obviously, in the late Vedic period and at the time when the Pāli texts were composed, someone to be punished by a supernatural being, like a Yakṣa, Gandharva, or a Ṛtu-devatā, is killed by a blow of a metal hammer and his head splits (into seven pieces, as the Buddhist texts say). In these passages killing is regarded as something quite real and is also described in [a] realistic way – shattering someone's head off with a hammer'.<sup>85</sup>

Insler agrees that in these cases the threat of a literal death is indeed implicit in the narrative, yet he argues that these examples are different in kind to the head shattering episodes in verbal disputes. Insler maintains that in these two examples, head shattering is introduced as a punishment for specific crimes. Ambaṭṭa is threatened to be punished for falsifying his identity, while Yavakrī is punished for attempting to rape the Apsarā: 'Is it therefore not possible that head smashing at one time was equally a means of death for such instances of falsification? In short, it is my opinion that there were some crimes whose original punishment entailed the smashing of the violator's head by some type of blunt instrument'.<sup>86</sup> In his analysis of these

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<sup>84</sup> JB 2.269.

<sup>85</sup> Witzel (1987: 384-5).

<sup>86</sup> Insler (1989/90: 107).

stories Insler makes an important point: merely because head shattering is considered real in some literary episodes, it is not necessarily considered real in others. As he explains, the Yavakrī story, in particular, is quite different from the *brahmodya* episodes, not only in terms of what the story is about, but also its language and specifically the ways of expressing head shattering.<sup>87</sup> Thus, by establishing the differences in the kinds of stories that feature head shattering, Insler interprets *vi mūrdha patati* as losing one's head or making a fool of oneself, concluding that if this meaning is correct 'then it must also be true that no one ever died within the context of a Brahmanic debate'.<sup>88</sup>

Both Witzel and Insler bring up important points and cite examples that shed light on this issue, but with their diametrically opposed conclusions, where does this leave us in understanding the threat of head shattering in the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya*? Thus far, we have followed Insler's rendering of this phrase on the grounds that in the episodes we have considered there have been no explicit suggestions of a death threat. For example, just because a Yakṣa hovers above Ambaṭṭa with a hammer in the Pāli Canon, we cannot assume he is hovering over Śauceya Prācīnayogya or Uddālaka Āruṇi when they are faced with this threat. Rather, it is significant that in the episodes that we have looked at thus far, namely the private debates featuring Uddālaka Āruṇi, there is nothing in the narrative to suggest losing one's head is a literal threat. These episodes are primarily about a competition for personal authority, where losing one's reputation would be considered a terrible consequence. As Insler has expressed: 'The

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<sup>87</sup> Insler explains: '... the vocabulary of the JB tales is quite distinct from that of the other Brahmanic stories concerning theological discussion. Where the latter employ the uniform collocation *mūrdha vipatati* and the like, the JB narratives appear with the verbs *praharati* and *prajaghāna* (*mūrdhānam*)' (1989/90: 105). Although it is clear that the JB story is a different kind of story than the narrative accounts of the *brahmodya*, it is not necessarily the case that this is also true of the Ambaṭṭa tale. In fact, this story has a number of features that indicate similarities with Upaniṣadic stories. I hope to address these similarities in upcoming research.

<sup>88</sup> Insler (1989/90: 115). Part of Insler's argument is also based on the similarities between the head shattering incidents and an episode in the ṚV (4.9).

learned man simply is warning the other person that he is on the point of making a fool of himself before the others. What greater blow to one's pretige could happen among those who especially consider themselves learned?'<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, although Insler is correct in challenging Witzel's tendency to interpret all of these incidents as a mortal threat, he goes too far in the opposite direction in concluding that no actual deaths are recounted in the context of philosophical debates. In the remainder of this section we will return to the tournament in Janaka's court and examine the events that lead up to its dramatic conclusion. As we will see, there are compelling reasons to suggest that Śākalya does actually lose his head at the end of this *brahmodya*. This is not to suggest that all such incidents should be taken literally in this way, but rather that this conclusion is specific to the debate in Janaka's court and separates this *brahmodya* from other similar episodes. As Olivelle has suggested: '[Head shattering] may have been used metaphorically at first to mean something like our colloquial use 'blow your mind', or 'go nuts'... The metaphor may have been turned into a threat and a curse with fatal consequences later on, and the myth of the shattering of Śākalya's head may have been the basis of this transformation'.<sup>90</sup>

The most compelling reason to assume that Śākalya's head shattering is meant to be a real death is because his death is also reported in a similar incident in the ŚB.<sup>91</sup> In the ŚB version, there is also a debate sponsored by Janaka, but in this case the verbal exchange features Śākalya as Yājñavalkya's only challenger. Importantly, in this encounter Yājñavalkya accuses Śākalya of asking questions beyond his knowledge and predicts that he will die as a consequence. The ŚB then confirms that Śākalya

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<sup>89</sup> Insler 1989/90: 114-5.

<sup>90</sup> Olivelle 1996: 295.

<sup>91</sup> ŚB 11.6.3.11.

died, although it does not specify when or how he dies. That Śākalya's death is clearly reported in the ŚB, it is highly unlikely that the reference to his head shattering in the BU merely refers to Śākalya losing face or his reputation. Rather than change his fate, the BU version of this incident attributes Śākalya's death to a different cause. Whereas in the ŚB he dies after Yājñavalkya predict his death, in the BU he dies after Yājñavalkya warns him that his head will shatter apart. We will look at the implications of this change in the narrative at the end of this section, for now however it is important to show that this case of head shattering should be taken literally.<sup>92</sup>

Let us now examine the events leading up to the dramatic conclusion of this debate. A good place to start is Yājñavalkya's encounter with Gārgī Vācaknavī, because it is in response to Gārgī's line of questioning that Yājñavalkya first invokes the threat of head shattering, warning her that if she does not stop asking questions her head will burst apart. With this challenge the atmosphere of the debate rises in intensity. By means of this threat, Yājñavalkya accuses Gārgī of asking beyond her own knowledge. Although Gārgī proves otherwise, Yājñavalkya seems to assume that he is picking on an easy target. As we will see the fourth chapter, throughout the Upaniṣads the knowledge of women is not sanctioned with discursive authority, even when women make the same philosophical claims as eminent brahmins. Thus, it is not surprising that Yājñavalkya chooses to call Gārgī's bluff by questioning her knowledge, rather than to try to answer her question. This incident highlights Yājñavalkya's aggressive style of argumentation. The fact that Gārgī challenges

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<sup>92</sup> To say that this should be taken literally does not imply that this scene records a real historic event. Rather, Śākalya's head really shatters apart in the context of the story. It is important to remember that the Upaniṣadic narratives are stories, based on real-world activities, but not actual records of real-life incidents. It is not surprising therefore, that brahmins would want to embellish these tales to attribute to themselves powers that they did not actually have in real life. In this way, Insler is probably correct in assuming that no real death actually took place in a Brahmanic debate, but that is not the same thing as saying that a real death did not take place in an ancient Indian story about a debate.

Yājñavalkya again after Uddālaka Āruṇi, however, suggests that she is confident that she is not speaking beyond her knowledge and that, consequently, Yājñavalkya's threat cannot harm her.

After Yājñavalkya threatens Gārgī, Uddālaka Āruṇi steps in to make a challenge. As we have seen, Uddālaka Āruṇi is Yājñavalkya's superior and is sometimes considered his teacher. Additionally, in the ŚB it is Uddālaka who is most closely associated with the threat of head shattering. Uddālaka begins his questions by recounting the same frame story as Bhujyu Lāhyāyani did earlier in the debate. Uddālaka also visited Patañcala Kāpya when he was a student. Yet, in Uddālaka's version it is the wife of Patañcala, rather than his daughter, who is possessed by a Gandharva, in this case Kabhanda Ārthavaṇa. As he is speaking to Yājñavalkya, Uddālaka emphasises that he knows the discourse that the Gandharva has taught him: a teaching about the string on which this world and the next are strung together. Uddālaka's outright assertion that he knows this discourse is a response to how Yājñavalkya has handled Gārgī's question. Surely, Yājñavalkya is not about to question the knowledge of his superior, especially when Uddālaka specifically claims that he knows the discourse.

Furthermore, Uddālaka pre-emptively challenges Yājñavalkya by warning that his head will shatter apart if he, who has claimed authority over the other brahmins, does not know this discourse: 'So if you drive away the cows meant for the brahmins, Yājñavalkya, without knowing what that string is and who the inner controller is, your head will shatter apart'.<sup>93</sup> Uddālaka's use of this threat at this moment of the *brahmodya* suggests that Uddālaka shares a similar concern with the other Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins: that Yājñavalkya is not playing by the rules. By emphasising what

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<sup>93</sup> BU 3.7.1.

will happen if he does not answer properly, Uddālaka forces Yājñavalkya to answer his questions directly.

Uddālaka's challenge is also a more specific response to how Yājñavalkya answered Gārgī. Uddālaka's question to Yājñavalkya is about the string on which this world and the next are woven together. Here Uddālaka uses the same weaving imagery as Gārgī and their questions are almost identical.<sup>94</sup> This teaching is similar to the question that Gārgī asks initially: on what is water woven back and forth?<sup>95</sup> Significantly, it is after Uddālaka offers his counter-challenge to Yājñavalkya that Gārgī re-joins the debate and continues to question Yājñavalkya, further emphasising that Uddālaka has stepped in to defend her.

Yājñavalkya responds with a long discourse about *ātman*. He argues that *ātman* is the inner controller, the immortal (*amṛta*), and is distinct from the *prāṇās* and the physical and mental capacities of the body. He concludes with a similar teaching that he had offered Uṣasta and Kauṣītakeya: that the *ātman* is the perceiver of all the senses and that it therefore cannot be perceived by the senses. Here we see that when Yājñavalkya is threatened he reveals his more characteristic teaching, and it is this discourse that finally silences Uddālaka.

The tension in this *brahmodya* continues to build as Gārgī enters the debate for the second time. She begins by addressing all the brahmins present and then predicts that if Yājñavalkya can answer her two questions, then none of them will be able to defeat him. She then frames her first question with a martial metaphor comparing herself to a fierce warrior who is stringing her bow with two deadly arrows and rising

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<sup>94</sup> Findly 1985: 43.

<sup>95</sup> BU 3.6.1.

to challenge her enemy. She demands: 'Give me the answers to them!'<sup>96</sup> This martial metaphor not only points to the political and regional rivalries that are at stake, but also foreshadows the fatal conclusions of this debate. We will discuss this encounter between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya in greater detail in the fourth chapter. For now, we will skip to the end of their exchange when Gārgī again predicts the outcome of the *brahmodya*. For the second time, she addresses all the brahmins and predicts that something dramatic is about to occur: 'You should consider yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects'.<sup>97</sup>

After Gārgī's warning, Śākalya Vidagdha, the final opponent, challenges Yājñavalkya.<sup>98</sup> In the ŚB version of this dialogue, Śākalya is the only opponent of Yājñavalkya, and the fact that he is the last one to challenge Yājñavalkya in this *brahmodya* and that his encounter with him is the longest, suggests that despite Yājñavalkya's insults, Śākalya poses the biggest threat to him. Like in the ŚB version, Śākalya begins his interrogation by asking Yājñavalkya how many gods there are. In fact, the first section of their debate in the BU is almost exactly the same as it appears in the ŚB. In the ŚB, however, Yājñavalkya accuses Śākalya of questioning beyond his knowledge after he asks about who is the one god. In both versions Yājñavalkya answers: breath (*prāṇa*). Whereas in the ŚB Yājñavalkya terminates the discussion with this answer, in the BU Yājñavalkya reverses the challenge and begins to question Śākalya: 'But then tell me, Śākalya, who is ... the god [of the person]?'<sup>99</sup> Importantly, this is the first time that Yājñavalkya assumes the role of the interrogator in this

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<sup>96</sup> BU 3.8.2.

<sup>97</sup> BU 3.8.12.

<sup>98</sup> Witzel points out that Śākalya's name is a double entendre. One of the meanings of his name is 'the clever one'. This is appropriate as Yājñavalkya's victory in the debate is more meaningful when Śākalya is cast as a strong opponent. However, his name can also mean 'burnt up', 'cremated' or 'decomposed'. This meaning foreshadows his eventual fate in this *brahmodya* (Witzel 1987: 405).

<sup>99</sup> BU 3.9.10.



*brahmodya*. Śākalya has a number of responses as Yājñavalkya continues to test him, however, when Śākalya answers that Prajāpati is the god of the person, Yājñavalkya condescendingly exclaims: ‘Poor Śākalya! I’m afraid these brahmins have made you their cat’s paw’.<sup>100</sup> After this remark, Śākalya again takes up the questioning, this time asking Yājñavalkya how he is able to out-talk (*ati-vad*) the other brahmins. Śākalya’s use of the term *ativādin* implies that he questions whether Yājñavalkya has the true knowledge to match his oratory skills.

Later, after Śākalya asks about what the heart is founded upon, Yājñavalkya again insults Śākalya: ‘What an imbecile [*ahallika*] you are to think that [the heart] could be founded anywhere other than ourselves’.<sup>101</sup> It is interesting that this is the second time that Yājñavalkya has answered that something has been founded upon the heart. Earlier, Yājñavalkya had answered that semen was founded upon the heart. When Yājñavalkya had delivered this answer, Śākalya did not continue in the same line of questioning, but rather asked him about the god of the northern quarter. In this case, however, Śākalya continues in the same line of questioning and Yājñavalkya accuses him of being stupid. This is another example of how Yājñavalkya uses insults and intimidation as a means to gain the upper hand in the argument. Śākalya questions Yājñavalkya for much longer than his other opponents and this could be seen as his relative success in arguing with Yājñavalkya. Yet, as in his encounter with Gārgī, when Yājñavalkya is not convincing his opponents with his knowledge, he relies on threats and insults to intimidate them.

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<sup>100</sup> BU 3.9.18. This sarcastic remark is also made by Yājñavalkya in the ŚB (11.6.3.3). As Olivelle suggests, this response makes more sense in the ŚB, as in that context Śākalya is the only one to challenge Yājñavalkya, thus acting as a spokesperson for the brahmins as a group (1996: 313 n.).

<sup>101</sup> BU 3.9.25.

After Śākalya asks who the up-breath (*prāṇa*) is founded upon, Yājñavalkya answers the link-breath (*apāna*) and then begins a brief discourse about *ātman*. Yājñavalkya teaches that *ātman* is the perceiving subject and not an object of thought or perception. Again, Yājñavalkya saves his more characteristic teaching for the end of their encounter. Then Yājñavalkya assumes the role of the interrogator again and says: 'I ask you about that person providing the hidden connections (*upaniṣad*) – the one who carries off these other persons, brings them back and rises above them? If you will not tell me about that, your head will shatter apart'.<sup>102</sup> Śākalya does not know the answer and his head does indeed shatter apart.<sup>103</sup>

The implications of this head shattering episode can be further explored by comparing it with the encounter between Yājñavalkya and Śākalya in the ŚB. In the ŚB, Śākalya dies at the end of the dialogue, but his head does not shatter apart. Additionally, Śākalya's death is not brought about by his inability to answer questions (Yājñavalkya does not assume the role of the interrogator), but rather because he questions beyond his own knowledge. In this case, Yājñavalkya merely predicts Śākalya's death. In the BU, however, Śākalya does not ask beyond his knowledge, but Yājñavalkya forces him to answer a question saying: 'If you do not tell me your head will shatter apart'.<sup>104</sup> These changes in the narrative are significant because by pressuring Śākalya to answer his question and then by explicitly threatening him, Yājñavalkya is more connected as an agent to Śākalya's death. Whereas in the ŚB Yājñavalkya has the ability to foresee Śākalya's death, the BU suggests that he has the

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<sup>102</sup> BU3.9.26.

<sup>103</sup> Rather curiously, after recounting his death, the text adds that his bones were later stolen by thieves, who mistook them for something else. Witzel discusses this mysterious detail at length (1987: 380).

<sup>104</sup> BU 3.9.26

power to kill him. As Witzel points out, in the ŚB Śākalya's death is merely reported, whereas in the BU it is intended as the climax of the discussion.<sup>105</sup>

After Śākalya's head shatters apart, Yājñavalkya challenges all the brahmins at once. He declares that he is ready to answer any of their individual or collective questions or he is willing to ask them questions, either individually or collectively. Not surprisingly, none of the brahmins dare to challenge him further and Yājñavalkya emerges unanimously as the victor. In this debate, Yājñavalkya is accused of speaking obscurely on several occasions and a number of his opponents ask questions in such a way which shows that they are unhappy with his answers. Yājñavalkya twice threatens and once uses a fatal curse to silence his opponents. The competitive and potentially violent nature of this *brahmodya* illustrates the high stakes of philosophical discussion in the Upaniṣads. As Brereton comments: 'Initially this is a contest for cows, but becomes a life and death struggle'.<sup>106</sup>

#### H. Upaniṣadic disourse and material wealth:

Thus far, we have looked at the personal and political consequences at stake in the *brahmodya*. However, in addition to competing for their personal reputations and on the behalf of the kings who sponsored them, brahmins also competed for large amounts of material wealth. Importantly, the wealth associated with the prize of winning a *brahmodya* is also connected to the Upaniṣadic critique of sacrifice. Not only does the *brahmodya* establish itself as a practice distinct from sacrifice, but it also eclipses ritual performance as the activity through which brahmins have the opportunity to secure the most wealth. The growing importance of the *brahmodya* in

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<sup>105</sup> Witzel (1987: 406).

<sup>106</sup> Brereton (1997: 2).

relation to the sacrifice is clear from the competition in Janaka's court. The narrative tells us that the brahmins had gathered together because Janaka had 'set out to perform a sacrifice at which he intended to give lavish gifts to the officiating priests'.<sup>107</sup> Although the *brahmodya* is clearly connected to sacrifice, the narrative never returns to the issue of sacrifice: the *brahmodya* itself is the focus of the story. As opposed to the earlier accounts where the *brahmodya* is embedded within ritual actions, the debate in Janaka's court is not presented as merely a part of the sacrifice. Rather, the *brahmodya* emerges as an authoritative practice in its own right. The authority that Yājñavalkya claims at both the beginning and end of the debate is completely based on his performance in the *brahmodya* itself.

Another episode that clearly distinguishes philosophical discussion from sacrificial performance features Uṣasti Cākrāyaṇa, who is described as a pauper living in the village of a rich man.<sup>108</sup> He has to resort to begging from the rich man, but refuses to take more than he needs to survive. The next morning Uṣasti arrives at a sacrifice where the officiating priests do not know the esoteric significance of the ritual actions they are performing. Uṣasti criticises them, warning that if they continue to perform the Vedic chants without the proper knowledge that their heads will shatter apart. This warning attracts the attention of the *yajamāna* who then asks Uṣasti to perform all the priestly duties. Before agreeing, however, Uṣasti demands that he earn the same amount as all the other priests combined.

In this story Upaniṣadic teachings are juxtaposed to the practice of sacrifice.<sup>109</sup>

Uṣasti, who is a specialist in the discursive knowledge characteristic of the Upaniṣads,

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<sup>107</sup> BU 3.1.1.

<sup>108</sup> CU 1.10.1.

<sup>109</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, there are a number of criticisms of sacrifice in the early Upaniṣads. Most of the Upaniṣadic discourses generally, and especially the dialogues, take the position that discursive knowledge is more important than ritual activity.

is presented favourably in comparison to the ritual specialists. Although the text suggests that a sacrifice was performed, this episode ends with the ritualists asking Uṣasti to teach them what he knows. Thus, despite the fact that the sacrifice is mentioned and serves as a backdrop to this incident, the narrative emphasises Uṣasti's teaching.

Both the *brahmodya* in Janaka's court and the story of Uṣasti begin with a sacrifice, but instead focus on a debate or a teaching when one brahmin proves his authority over more traditional priests who are ritual specialists. The complex relationship between the early Upaniṣads and the practice of sacrifice has been discussed on a number of occasions. Some scholars have attempted to explain this relationship as an internalisation of the ritual, while others have suggested that economic factors led to the decline in the practice of sacrifice.<sup>110</sup> Although the Upaniṣads are critical of the sacrifice and do present practices like teaching and debating as superior, they nevertheless clearly indicate that sacrifices are still performed. In the examples of Yājñavalkya and Uṣasti, although they prove their authority through practices set in contradistinction to sacrifice, one of their rewards for proving their knowledge is the role of performing a sacrifice. These cases do not point to a complete rejection of sacrifice, but rather to a change of focus to other practices like teaching and debating.

As the sacrifice is no longer the central focus, many Upaniṣadic narratives tell the story of brahmins who are looking for new ways to make a living in a changing world. The Upaniṣads establish teaching and debating, over and above ritual expertise, as the currency by which brahmins survive, and indeed claim power. Importantly, the

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<sup>110</sup> Heesterman (1985), Tull (1989) and Biarreau (1994) have all emphasised the continuity of the tradition, especially the notion that the sacrifice was internalised. Thapar (1984) has argued that the sacrifice declined because of economic factors.

economic value to Upaniṣadic discourse is highlighted on numerous occasions. The high financial stakes of debates between brahmins adds to the competitive atmosphere of verbal contests.

Many of the brahmins who are depicted as knowledgeable are described teaching and debating in a number of regions throughout ancient north India. Indeed, the traveling brahmin is an important epithet for the knowledgeable Upaniṣadic teacher. Yājñavalkya, Uddālaka and Śvetaketu are all described in the ŚB as traveling about on their chariots. Indeed, Uddālaka Āruṇi travels throughout all of north India trading in ideas, not only appearing with Yājñavalkya in Videha, but also driving his chariot in the northern region of Madras and learning from Pravāhaṇa in Pañcāla.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, the KsU describes Gārgya as a learned man who was from Uśinara, who had traveled widely in Satvan, Matsya, Kuru and Pañcāla, Kāśi and Videha.<sup>112</sup> These examples indicate that travel and familiarity with a number of the different regions function as important qualifications for an Upaniṣadic teacher.

Of all the brahmins who travel about seeking patronage, Yājñavalkya by far emerges as the wealthiest. Indeed, on a number of occasions he jokes about his pursuit of material possessions. Before his debate with the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins Yājñavalkya cynically claims that the economic prize of cows and gold outweighs the honour of being declared the most learned brahmin.<sup>113</sup> Although this quip is intended as a joke, and quite likely is a debating tactic to unsettle his opponents, this remark also indicates that Yājñavalkya is well aware of the considerable financial gain to be

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<sup>111</sup> BU 3.71; CU 5.3.1.

<sup>112</sup> KsU 4.1.

<sup>113</sup> Although Yājñavalkya is associated with his desire for wealth in the BU, in the ŚB he is contrasted with Aupoditeya, who explicitly asks for cows. Here it is Aupoditeya who is depicted as seeking the material rewards of the sacrifice, and Yājñavalkya is cast as the more traditional brahmin who strives for the correct performance of the ritual. Yājñavalkya says: 'For at this indeed the brahmin should strive, that he be a *brahma-varcasin* (illuminated by the *brahma*, or sacred wit)' (ŚB 1.9.3.16). By the time of the Upaniṣads, however, Yājñavalkya is the brahmin most associated with material wealth.

won from philosophical tournaments. In a later discussion with Janaka, the king asks him: ‘Yājñavalkya, why have you come? Are you after cows or subtle disquisitions?’<sup>114</sup> Yājñavalkya confirms Janaka’s comment, answering: ‘Both, your majesty’. This exchange is illustrative of the friendly banter between the brahmin and king, yet these remarks also bring attention to Yājñavalkya’s reputation for pursuing material gain. In fact, in every one of Yājñavalkya’s dialogues an economic transaction takes place. He claims the prize at Janaka’s tournament, he wins thousands of cows from Janaka for his private instructions and his dialogue with Maitreyī takes place within the context of dividing his inheritance.

As Upaniṣadic discourses begin to compete with sacrifice in terms of its claims to bring desired rewards, teachings begin to be more expensive. Brahmins, who are the specialists of these new teachings, can sell their ideas for material goods like gold, cows and land. It is significant that Yājñavalkya earns more from his debate in Janaka’s court as it appears in the BU than he does in the frame narrative in the ŚB. In the ŚB Janaka gives away a hundred cows and numerous gifts, yet in the BU Janaka gives away the much more lavish prize of one thousand cows, each with ten pieces of gold attached.<sup>115</sup> Although these figures are likely to be exaggerations, the inflated value of winning a *brahmodya* in the Upaniṣads reflects its emerging importance.

A number of other dialogues further highlight the economic aspect of Upaniṣadic knowledge. One example features Jānaśruti Pauṭrāyana and Raikva.<sup>116</sup> Jānaśruti, presumably a king, is described as a man who is totally devoted to giving and who built numerous hospices. Importantly, these attributes are shared by a number of Upaniṣadic kings. One day, Jānaśruti overhears two geese talking about a famous

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<sup>114</sup> BU 4.1.1.

<sup>115</sup> ŚB 9.6.3.1; BU 3.3.1.

<sup>116</sup> CU 4.1.1-4.2.5.

teacher known as Raikva the gatherer. Jānaśruti sends his steward to find Raikva because he wants to learn what Raikva knows.<sup>117</sup> After his steward has located him, Jānaśruti approaches Raikva with 'six hundred cows, a gold necklace (*niṣka*), and a carriage (*ratha*) drawn by a she-mule'. At first Raikva refuses this material wealth and rudely calls Jānaśruti a *sūdra*, ordering him to leave and take his wealth with him. Jānaśruti, however, returns to Raikva, offering him the same necklace and carriage, but this time one thousand cows (*sahasraṁ gavām*), as well as his daughter (*duhitā*) and a village.<sup>118</sup>

Returning to Uṣasti Cākrāyaṇa, in addition to displaying a critique of the sacrifice, his story also illustrates how brahmins competed amongst each other for patronage. Before arriving at the sacrifice Uṣasti had no food and lived like a pauper.<sup>119</sup> Yet, by displaying his knowledge in front of the *yajamāna*, Uṣasti earns himself the position of carrying out the sacrifice.<sup>120</sup> Significantly, he demands a fee equal to the total of all the other brahmins. Here we see that in the marketplace of Upaniṣadic ideas, brahmins are pitted against each other as individuals rather than collectively performing rituals together. One brahmin like Uṣasti can perform the jobs of all the other priests combined. Thus, an important incentive for brahmins to learn

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<sup>117</sup> Initially, the steward cannot find Raikva, but Jānaśruti instructs him to search again 'in a place where one would search for a non-brahmin'. Here we see another example of someone who is not a brahmin by birth, but is treated with the respect of a brahmin because of his reputation for being knowledgeable.

<sup>118</sup> This is the only instance in the Upaniṣads where land is given in exchange for an Upaniṣadic teaching. In fact, Jānaśruti's gift to Raikva resembles the *brahmadeyya* as described in the early Buddhist literature. These were tracts of land given as a 'royal gift' from the king to eminent brahmins. Gokhale describes these dwellings as villages predominantly inhabited by brahmins designed in a proprietary way for the residence and maintenance of learned brahmins' (Gokhale 1996: 29). Additionally, the marriage is represented in this dialogue resembles the practice of bride price. As Witzel points out, this type of marriage is extremely rare in the Brāhmanical textual tradition (1996: 164). For more discussion on bride price in ancient Indian texts see Jamison 1996: (213-15).

<sup>119</sup> CU 1.10.1-1.11.9.

<sup>120</sup> In the *brahmodya* in Janaka's court, Yājñavalkya shows he knows all the other priestly duties in his response of Aśvalya.



Upaniṣadic teachings is that they reap the same economic rewards as the collective payment of the sacrifice.

Two of the most explicit examples where wealth is directly compared to Upaniṣadic knowledge feature Uddālaka Āruṇi and Naciketas. In the BU version of Uddālaka's dialogue with Pravāhaṇa, Uddālaka claims: 'I have my share of gold, cows, horses, slave girls, blankets and clothes.'<sup>121</sup> Similarly, in the KaU Naciketas refuses the material wealth offered by Yama: 'Keep your horses, your songs and dances. With wealth you cannot make a man content. Will we get to keep wealth when we have seen you [death]?'<sup>122</sup> On the one hand, these details contrast knowledge with material wealth and consistently present knowledge as more valuable than worldly possessions. Yet, on the other hand, these stories emphasise that a payment to brahmins is inextricably connected to Upaniṣadic discourse. Thus, although both Uddālaka and Naciketas refuse wealth for the sake of receiving a teaching, they are not necessarily choosing the spiritual over the material. Neither Uddālaka nor Naciketas are opting for a life without wealth or possessions. Rather, they recognise that with the rewards promised by Upaniṣadic knowledge there is no price that is too high to pay. Ultimately the knowledge they receive will be more valuable than the wealth that they refuse. In fact, Uddālaka's inventory of possessions is a good indication of how much more he can collect if he learns about the five fires from Pravāhaṇa. This attitude towards wealth is consistent throughout the Upaniṣads. Taken together, these narrative episodes do not reflect the ideals of mendicants who abstain from the affairs of everyday life, but rather illustrate that the brahmins in the Upaniṣads are wily negotiators who demand high rewards for their teachings.

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<sup>121</sup> BU 6.2.7.

<sup>122</sup> KaU 1.26-7.

### I. Yājñavalkya and renunciation:

The equation of knowledge and wealth, as well as the Upaniṣadic characterisation of brahmins as accumulating enormous amounts of material possessions and aggressively competing for patronage and power, is significant because scholars have often assumed that the Upaniṣads represent the expressions of a renunciate movement. However, scholars who have linked the Upaniṣads with renunciation have disagreed about whether renunciation was the natural outgrowth of Vedic ritualism or originated from non-Vedic traditions. Heesterman has most famously argued that the Upaniṣads represent a natural shift from ritualism to renunciation.<sup>123</sup> He sees the emergence of Upaniṣadic discourses as marking the beginning of the figure of the world-renouncer: 'It would seem to me that here we touch the principle of world renunciation, the emergence of which has been of crucial importance in the development of Indian religious thinking. The renouncer can turn his back on the world because he is emancipated from the relations which govern it'.<sup>124</sup> For Heesterman, not only do the discourses of the Upaniṣads follow naturally from speculation about the sacrifice, but the practice of world renunciation is the logical and inevitable outgrowth of ritual activity. Importantly, Heesterman sees the role of the brahmin as primarily one of detachment from the world: '...the real brahmin is not the officiating priest or *purohita*, but the brahmin who keeps aloof from occupations that would enclose him in the web of relations and tie him to the others'.<sup>125</sup> Heesterman defines, what he calls

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<sup>123</sup> Madeleine Biardeau has also emphasised the continuity of the tradition, especially the notion that the sacrifice was internalised: '[After the Brāhmaṇas] sacrifice is not abandoned, but instead of offering it to the gods, in real fire, it is offered to one's *ātman*, in the fire of breath. All the outward observances are thus, partially at least, internalized' (Biardeau 1994).

<sup>124</sup> Heesterman 1985: 38-44.

<sup>125</sup> Heesterman 1985: 42.

the 'inner conflict of tradition', as between the renunciation-oriented brahmin and the this-worldly king.

As Heesterman's interpretative framework has been called the orthogenetic model, Kaelber has termed the alternative model 'challenge and assimilation'.<sup>126</sup> This is the view that has been presented by scholars such as Eliade and Dumont. Dumont understands the history of Indian religion and society in terms of the dichotomy between 'man-in-the-world' and 'individual-outside-the-world'.<sup>127</sup> For Dumont, all religio-philosophical innovation originated among the world renouncers. In this way, Dumont does not ascribe authorship to either brahmins or *kṣatriyas*, but rather he sees the Upaniṣads as the products of both those brahmins and *kṣatriyas* who had become renunciates: 'At the end of the Vedic period, in the Upanishads, one can see the development of philosophical speculation bearing first and foremost on the universal being. This speculation is the work of Brahmins and Kshatriyas who withdrew in order to devote themselves to it'.<sup>128</sup>

Although they ascribe the authorship of new ideas to different sources, both the orthogenetic and the assimilation arguments agree in assuming that the teachings of the early Upaniṣads are connected to renunciation. It is well accepted that by the time of the Buddha there was quite a large population of wandering mendicants, and indeed there are some references that suggest renunciation in the early Upaniṣads. However, renunciation is not the main practice described in the narrative. Rather, far from achieving a distance from social relations, the brahmins, as depicted in the Upaniṣadic dialogues, are active participants in their social world: brahmins are shown in interactive social situations like teaching, learning and debating, while Upaniṣadic

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<sup>126</sup> Kaelber 1989: 101-124.

<sup>127</sup> Dumont 1966: 185.

<sup>128</sup> Dumont 1966: 186.

ideas are presented firmly within the contexts of personal, regional and political rivalries.

Despite the tendency of the dialogues to emphasise the social and interactive aspects of Upaniṣadic philosophy, there are nevertheless teachings that clearly suggest renunciation. The character of Yājñavalkya most embodies this conflict between the worldly and renunciate brahmin. In one of his teachings to Janaka, for example, Yājñavalkya explicitly advocates the life of mendicancy. In this discourse about *ātman* and *prāṇa* Yājñavalkya explains that brahmins seek to know *ātman* through Vedic recitation, sacrifice, gift-giving, austerity and fasting. However, those who come to know *ātman* live a life of wandering: 'It is he, on knowing whom, a man becomes a sage. It is when they desire him as their world that wandering ascetics undertake the ascetic life of wandering'.<sup>129</sup> If Yājñavalkya's teaching had stopped here, there would be nothing in that necessarily contradicted the lifestyle of the brahmin characters portrayed throughout the Upaniṣadic dialogues, not to mention Yājñavalkya's own life. As we have seen in the previous chapter, many brahmin teachers are both householders and wanderers. Satyakāma, for example, has a wife and has taken on a number of students, yet, he still leaves his household for a period of time, presumably to learn more discourses, participate in a debate or to attract more students. Additionally, Uddālaka Āruṇi, whose travels are recorded more than any other character, maintains his important duty as a householder by having a son.

However, the next part of Yājñavalkya's instruction clearly contradicts the discourses of other Upaniṣadic teachers. Here, Yājñavalkya explains to Janaka that when one knows *ātman*, there is no need for offspring. In fact, Yājñavalkya relates that sages in former times who had come to know *ātman* 'gave up the desire for sons, the

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<sup>129</sup> BU 4.4.22.

desire for wealth, and the desire for worlds, and undertook the mendicant life'.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, he relates this same discourse to Kahola Kauṣītakeya during the *brahmodya*, indicating that this instruction is specifically associated with Yājñavalkya. In these examples, Yājñavalkya clearly challenges the importance of having sons, which, as we will examine further, is considered a fundamental link to immortality in many Upaniṣadic discourses. In addition to teaching about giving up the desire for sons, Yājñavalkya seems to follow his own advice, as he has no sons and one version of his dialogue with Maitreyī specifically states that he leaves his household for the life of a wandering mendicant.<sup>131</sup> Yājñavalkya's association with these ideals further sets him apart from Kuru-Pāñcāla brahmins, as well as other Upaniṣadic teachers, and further develops his innovative literary personality.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that most brahmins in the Upaniṣads are not depicted as living this sort of life and Yājñavalkya is the only brahmin who advocates the path of renunciation. In fact, Yājñavalkya's own adherence to this life remains ambiguous; despite teaching about renunciation, Yājñavalkya amasses more wealth than any other Upaniṣadic teacher and is connected to both the court and the household. Additionally, in both instances where Yājñavalkya teaches that wealth is not important, he wins a sizeable amount of money. In Janaka's *brahmodya* he takes home the gold and cows. Similarly, after his instruction to Janaka, the king offers both himself and the people of Videha to be his slaves. Then the narrative concludes, promising that one who knows this discourse about *ātman* finds wealth. Thus, even when Yājñavalkya teaches about the life of mendicancy, he himself is speaking within a context where his knowledge gains him tremendous wealth.

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<sup>130</sup> BU 4.4.22.

<sup>131</sup> BU 4.5.1.

Furthermore, Yājñavalkya's knowledge is generated and disseminated within the context of discussion and debate. As presented by the dialogues, Yājñavalkya's knowledge is not the result of solitary contemplation, but rather produced through the competitive dynamics of the *brahmodya*. As we have seen, the kind of knowledge that Yājñavalkya displays to out-talk other brahmins is not based exclusively on the truth of his teachings, but also on his knowledge of the rules of game of debate.

In this way, Yājñavalkya's knowledge is more connected to the competitive practice of the *brahmodya* than to the renunciate life. It is only in the later Upaniṣads where knowledge is explicitly connected to renunciation and mendicancy. Similar to how the early Upaniṣads outline practices of teaching and debating, the later Upaniṣads directly connect their discourses with meditative and yogic practices. The KaU describes yogic practices like making the perceptions still and reining the senses, while the SU is more explicit by describing bodily postures and controlling the breath.<sup>132</sup> Also the SU explains exactly where and under what conditions one should employ yogic practices: 'Level and clean; free of gravel, fire and sand, near noiseless running water and the like; pleasing to the mind but not offensive to the eye; provided with a cave or a nook sheltered from the wind – in such a spot should one engage in yogic practice'.<sup>133</sup> Although some of the teachings in the early Upaniṣads are later developed by yogic and renunciate traditions, these practices are not described in the dialogues. Rather than assume that these practices feature in the early Upaniṣads, even when they are not described, it seems clear that the primary practices associated with knowledge are teaching, debating, patronage and procreation.

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<sup>132</sup> KaU 6.10-11; SU 2.8-9.

<sup>133</sup> SU 2.10.

## J. The life-story of Yājñavalkya:

Throughout this chapter, we have returned to the literary character, Yājñavalkya. He not only is the persona most associated with the *brahmodya*, but he appears in more narrative episodes than any other figure in the Yajurvedic tradition. Additionally, similar to the CU's portrayal of Satyakāma, the BU presents an integrated biographical sketch of the life of Yājñavalkya. As we have seen, in the ŚB Yājñavalkya is often presented as merely an authoritative name but by the time of the BU Yājñavalkya has developed into a well-developed literary personality. He is consistently portrayed as a great knower of Upaniṣadic discourses, especially about *ātman* and *prāṇa*, and he teaches these discourses as a court brahmin under the patronage of King Janaka of Videha. As we will examine further in the next chapter, the BU explains Yājñavalkya's presence in Janaka's court by means of referring to an encounter between the two of them on chariots that is described in the ŚB. The entirety of books three and four in the BU consists of dialogues featuring Yājñavalkya and most of them assume the premise that he is the court priest Janaka. His first appearance in the third book is his debate against the Kuru-Pāñcāla brahmins. Subsequently, he has three short dialogues with Janaka, the last of which describes his release from serving the king. In the very next dialogue he appears at home with his two wives about to settle his inheritance and to embark on the life of a mendicant. Although alternative versions of some of these dialogues suggest that books three and four consist of distinct textual components that are only brought together through editing, their presentation within the BU forms a rough sketch of a life story of Yājñavalkya: the wealthy court priest who gives up both the court and the household to embark on a life of mendicancy.

Indeed, throughout these dialogues Yājñavalkya embodies a number of teachings that are central to the BU. For example, more than the CU or the KsU, the

BU emphasises the competitive nature of Upaniṣadic discourse and makes more explicit links between the debates of the brahmins and the political rivalries of kings. As we have seen, the debate in King Janaka's court is presented as a competition between Videha and Kuru-Pañcāla, and Gārgī's challenge to Yājñavalkya is compared to a military battle between Videha and Kāśī. In these cases, Yājñavalkya is the reference point that places Videha as the centre, and presents Kuru-Pañcāla and Kāśī as military and political threats. In contrast, the CU and KsU do not focus on one particular individual. For example, Satyakāma does not dominate the CU to the degree that Yājñavalkya does in the BU, nor are there any details that link Satyakāma to any specific geographical location. Other brahmins who figure prominently in the CU, for example Śāṇḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi, are generally associated with Kuru-Pañcāla, but the CU does not emphasise these details.

In regards to the KsU, the text takes its name from its alleged composer, Sarvajit Kauṣītaki. Kauṣītaki, however, is only mentioned once in the text and there are no narrative details about his character.<sup>134</sup> Of the other characters described in this Upaniṣad, only Ajātaśatru, king of Kāśī, is linked to a specific place, but the text does not generally favour Kāśī or any other particular region. Thus, although both the CU and KsU characterise Upaniṣadic discourse as competitive, with political and military implications, neither text presents knowledge within the context of any particular conflict. By contrast, it is through its depiction of Yājñavalkya that the BU makes specific political claims and aligns itself with the region of Videha.

In addition to highlighting political and military rivalries, the BU portrays a personal rivalry between Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma. Indeed the particular rivalry between these two brahmins is traceable to the ŚB, which presents Satyakāma as one

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<sup>134</sup> KsU 2.7.



of several brahmins with opposing views to Yājñavalkya.<sup>135</sup> Although Yājñavalkya does not appear at all in the CU, Satyakāma is mentioned twice in the BU, with both instances further pointing to a personal rivalry between them. On one occasion Satyakāma is one of the six priests whose arguments are summarised by Janaka before being rejected by Yājñavalkya. Again, Satyakāma is clearly depicted as a rival to Yājñavalkya. On another occasion Satyakāma is quoted as one of six priests who are authorities on the *mantha* rite. In a parallel passage in the CU, however, Satyakāma is the only name quoted. Thus, while the CU attributes exclusive authority of this teaching to Satyakāma, in the BU he is merely one of six priests associated with this discourse. Furthermore, two of the priests mentioned are Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya, where Uddālaka marks the beginning of the genealogy. In this case, not only does Satyakāma share authority in the BU, but he is placed subordinate to both Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya.

In addition to their historic rivalry, Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya represent competing portrayals of the ideal Upaniṣadic priest. The life-stories of both Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya remain sketches and are clearly not well-developed biographies or hagiographies, yet both literary personas are presented as paradigmatic figures, whose actions embody central teachings of their respective texts. Whereas Satyakāma is associated with the practice of teaching and the social location of the household, Yājñavalkya's character is most closely connected to the court and develops through his performance in the *brahmodya* as he competes against other brahmins and wins the patronage of kings.

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<sup>135</sup> ŚB 13.5.3.1-7.

## K. Conclusion:

In this chapter we have examined dialogues between brahmins and other brahmins. As opposed to verbal contests reflected in earlier Vedic texts which focus on a riddle or esoteric meaning, the early Upaniṣads emphasise the social activity of debate, highlighting both the participants, as well as how they interact with each other. We began by examining the distinction between the ritually-embedded verbal exchanges and the narrative descriptions of the *brahmodya*. On the one hand, the verbal exchanges that are part of the Vedic sacrifice serve as models for the two types of Upaniṣadic debate. Yet, when the *brahmodya* becomes a literary scene, a number of aspects of debating are highlighted, particularly the literary characters and the debating tactics they employ. Both of these features draw attention to the interactive and competitive nature of the *brahmodya*. In this way, the Upaniṣadic *brahmodya* is not merely a display of different philosophical positions, but an exploration of what is at stake in verbal competitions. The individual participants, especially the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins, link the philosophical competition to regional and political rivalries, suggesting that kings could establish their reputations partly through aligning themselves with particular priests. The narratives also highlight the tactical dimension of debate, indicating that, especially with such high stakes involved, philosophers like Yājñavalkya could employ his humour, as well as tricks and intimidation, to unsettle his opponents and emerge victorious in debate.

One of the features that is particularly connected with the *brahmodya* is the trope of head shattering. As we have seen, there has been disagreement among scholars as to its exact implications, but whether this phrase is taken figuratively or literally, it undoubtedly constitutes a threat, often used by brahmins to unsettle their opponents. The controversy, however, surrounds the degree of the threat. In this

chapter we have taken head shattering as predominantly an attack on personal authority, without physical consequences. As such, on most occasions this threat is a warning that one brahmin is about to lose their reputation or 'lose face' if they do not recognise the authority of the other. However, we have also argued that on one particular occasion this threat is quite literal and that it is invoked with fatal consequences. This reading is supported by the fact that Śākalya, the victim of Yājñavalkya's warning, is already known to have died in an earlier version of this debate. Additionally, it is not out of context that this *brahmodya*, which most develops the regional and political struggles involved in philosophical tournaments, would also show that there is more at stake in verbal debate than merely the reputation of brahmins.

In addition to the political and regional rivalries at stake, we have also explored the economic dimensions of the *brahmodya*. In every description of a *brahmodya* there is some sort of material exchange involved, indicating that an important part of the etiquette of philosophical practice is how to pay the brahmins for their teachings. Additionally, a number of stories explicitly point out that there is more wealth to be gained through debating than performing a Vedic sacrifice. In this way, the Upaniṣadic narratives present the *brahmodya* as eclipsing the sacrifice as the activity by which brahmins establish both their authority and their wealth.

The personal, political and economic dimensions of the *brahmodya* all point to the interactive and competitive nature of Upaniṣadic philosophy. These features are especially important to keep in mind when we remember that many of the prevailing interpretations of these texts characterise the Upaniṣadic brahmins as solitary knowledge-seekers aloof from the affairs of everyday life. As is clear from the narrative descriptions of debate, the brahmins that feature in the Upaniṣads are not

renunciates, but tactical orators and wily negotiators who are active participants in personal, regional and political rivalries.

Yājñavalkya is the character who most personifies these social aspects of Upaniṣadic philosophy. Despite teaching about renunciation, he establishes his reputation by means of the debates that he wins and the wealth he accumulates. Additionally, one of his most distinctive characteristics is his close friendship with King Janaka. We will explore this relationship further in the following chapter as we examine how brahmins interact with kings to win their patronage.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Kings who teach brahmins: the political dimensions of Upaniṣadic discourse

#### A. Introduction:

We will now turn our attention to a number of dialogues between brahmins and *kṣatriyas*. The king teaching a brahmin is an important literary trope throughout the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads. Indeed, some of the dialogues not only feature the king as teacher, but overtly claim that particular Upaniṣadic discourses actually originated among the *kṣatriyas*. In both the BU and CU, King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali explicitly asserts that his knowledge had never reached the brahmins before. The CU account makes an even stronger claim, maintaining that the *kṣatriya* monopoly on political power is founded on an exclusive possession of this knowledge: ‘Before you this knowledge had never reached the Brahmins. As a result in all the worlds government has belonged exclusively to royalty’.<sup>1</sup>

These words spoken by Pravāhaṇa have convinced many scholars that his teaching of the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*) was literally authored by *kṣatriyas*. However, as Bodewitz has illustrated, many of the teachings spoken by *kṣatriyas* in the Upaniṣads are discourses that had appeared earlier in Vedic literature, but then were re-presented as the speech of a *kṣatriya*. For example, Pravāhaṇa’s teaching of the five fires also appears in the JB, but without the context of a dialogue between a *kṣatriya* and a brahmin. Also, alternative versions of this discourse appear in the AĀ and ŚB.<sup>2</sup> Taking this into account, Pravāhaṇa’s claims are not a factual representation of the origins of the discourse, but rather part of the literary presentation of the

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<sup>1</sup> CU 5.3.7.

<sup>2</sup> A similar teaching appears in the AĀ (2.1.3) and the five fires appears as a secret teaching of the *agnihotra* in the ŚB (11.6.2.6-10).

Upaniṣadic teachings. Patrick Olivelle has commented: 'It is naive, therefore, to accept the literary evidence of the Upaniṣads regarding their *Kṣatriyas* authorship at face value and as historical fact ... The most we can say is that some segments of the Brahmanical community must have perceived it as advantageous to present doctrines they favored as coming from the royal elite'.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter we will consider Pravāhaṇa's claim within the context of other dialogues that feature brahmins and kings.

As we have seen in accounts of the *brahmodya*, Upaniṣadic discourses are presented in the context of political rivalries and a number of teachings make promises specifically connected to the goals of the king. Even though the king often teaches the brahmin, indicating that kings are not dependent upon brahmins for their knowledge, the Upaniṣads nevertheless emphasise that the presence of brahmins is essential. Receiving brahmins as honoured guests and giving them food and accommodation are integral aspects of the ideal Upaniṣadic king. In this way, attributing authorship of particular teachings to kings is part of a more general *kṣatriya* orientation that is present throughout the early Upaniṣads and reflects an attempt by brahmins to secure patronage from kings. Dialogues between brahmins and kings characterise Upaniṣadic knowledge as indispensable to the king's political power.

Of course, the king also had a central role in the sacrifice. Indeed, in the ritual texts there are a number of passages that praise kings for the specific sacrifices they sponsor. The ŚB, for example, contains a list of kings who had sponsored *aśvamedā* sacrifices and describes a great *aśvamedhā* hosted by Bharata Duḥṣānti where seventy-eight horses are bound near the Yamunā and fifty-five near the Gaṅgā.<sup>4</sup> His

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<sup>3</sup> Olivelle 1996: xxxv.

<sup>4</sup> ŚB 13.5.4.1-22.

descendent King Bharata conquered the earth and brought more than one thousand horses for Indra. Additionally, an important aspect of the mythology of the Brāhmaṇas is making an equivalence between the king, as *yajamāna*, and Prajāpati, suggesting a perceived divinity of the king. Like Prajāpati, the king is portrayed as lord of creatures and the sacrifice is an important aspect of displaying his divine power. However, in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, as the emphasis of discourse moves away from the performance of the sacrifice, the king is no longer depicted as *yajamāna*, sponsoring great sacrifices. Rather, the ideal Upaniṣadic king hosts philosophical tournaments and participates in philosophical discussions. As we will see, these activities are linked to a number of new theorisations about the king and the source of his power.

The kings who are the most prominent in the early Upaniṣads are Janaka, Aśvapati, Ajātaśatru and Pravāhaṇa. Janaka is known for both his knowledge and generosity. However, in the BU his political authority is increasingly attributed, not to his own knowledge, but to his affiliation with his court priest, Yājñavalkya. Aśvapati, the king of Kaikeya, teaches about *ātman vaiśvānara* to six brahmins.<sup>5</sup> He is depicted as a generous patron who provides food and accommodation to brahmins and who privileges brahmins known for their knowledge of Upaniṣadic discourse over priests who perform sacrifices. Ajātaśatru, the king of Kāśi, teaches about the vital functions in an attempt to compete with his political rival, Janaka. Ajātaśatru's teaching is characteristic of the knowledge attributed to kings throughout the Upaniṣads. Finally, Pravāhaṇa, the king of Pañcāla, teaches about the five fires to Uddālaka Āruṇi and claims that his knowledge is directly responsible for his royal power. His dialogue with Śvetaketu and Uddālaka not only depicts Pravāhaṇa as an ideal king, but also

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<sup>5</sup> ŚB 10.6.1.2; CU 5.11.4.

outlines the proper etiquette by which brahmins should approach the king when seeking patronage. As we will see, these stories about kings illustrate a *kṣatriyan* orientation in the early Upaniṣads. Not only do kings figure as major characters, but also many of the teachings are framed specifically within a political context and address the concerns of kings.

**B. *Kṣatriya* authorship:**

Before we analyse the dialogues between brahmins and kings, let us briefly review the scholarly debate about *kṣatriya* characters and the authorship of the Upaniṣads. According to the Indian tradition, the Vedas were composed by ancient *ṛṣis*, but have been preserved and transmitted by brahmins. However, there are a number of passages in the Upaniṣads that ascribe authorship of particular ideas to *kṣatriyas*. Garbe was the first modern scholar to comment on these passages, taking note of the fact that in a number of dialogues a *kṣatriya* teaches a brahmin. He concludes that some of the most important discourses in the Upaniṣads originated among *kṣatriyas*: 'It can be proven that the Brahman's profoundest wisdom, the doctrine of All-one, which has exercised an unmistakable influence on the intellectual life even of our time, did not have its origin in the circle of Brahmins at all...it took its rise from the warrior caste'.<sup>6</sup>

A number of scholars have followed Garbe in arguing that particular Upaniṣadic teachings were authored by the *kṣatriyas*. Deussen, for example, suggests that discourses about *ātman* were developed as a direct response against ritualism and were explicitly kept secret from the brahmins. Taking literally the claims of King

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Dasgupta (1988: 33).



Pravāhaṇa, he argues that the *ātman* teaching 'was taken up and cultivated primarily not in Brahman but in Kshatriya circles'.<sup>7</sup>

Frauwallner also takes seriously the narrative details that present *kṣatriyas* as important innovators of religio-philosophical ideas:

Regarding the circles in which the Upaniṣads originate, the texts themselves give a good idea. The frame of narrations or stories in which the imparting of most of the doctrines is inserted shows a living picture of those times... It is striking that in a whole number of texts, it is not the Brāhmaṇas but the adherents of the Kṣatriya caste, i.e. the Kṣatriyas who impart the instruction and that it is the Brāhmaṇas who are instructed. This is evidently taken out of the actual life itself. The Brāhmaṇas, who have handed down this text would hardly think of contriving this sort of thing, if in actuality there would have been no basis for it.<sup>8</sup>

Frauwallner qualifies this, however, by stating that those who ascribe the chief role to the *kṣatriyas* go too far. He argues that although the *kṣatriyas* were important contributors to what he calls the water and fire doctrines, they did not author the texts. Interestingly, Frauwallner, despite acknowledging a *kṣatriya* contribution, makes efforts to reserve the most important contributions for the brahmins.

A. B. Keith was one of the first scholars to challenge the theory of *kṣatriya* authorship as proposed by Garbe, Deussen and Frauwallner. Because of the strong connections between the Upaniṣads and earlier Vedic material, Keith refutes the suggestion that the ideas discussed by *kṣatriya* literary characters should be ascribed to actual *kṣatriya* authors: '...it is absolutely certain that the Upaniṣads, as we have them, are not the work of warriors, that they are handed down by priests'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than assume *kṣatriya* authorship, Keith poses the question: why would priests want to ascribe authorship to kings? He concludes: 'We must adopt a solution which explains

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<sup>7</sup> Deussen 2000: 19.

<sup>8</sup> Frauwallner 1973: 34.

<sup>9</sup> Keith 1989: 493-4.

why the whole Upaniṣad tradition is Brahmanical, and yet why the texts record actions of importance as regards the doctrines by the princes of earth'.<sup>10</sup>

Olivelle raises similar questions about the *kṣatriya* characters who claim authorship. Like Keith, Olivelle asks why brahmin composers would ascribe authorship of important teachings to the *kṣatriyas*. Olivelle speculates that identifying a teaching with a king served to align these discourses with a new age and a new urban culture: 'What these stories of kings teaching new doctrines to Brahmins point to, I believe, is a divide that existed within the Brahmin tradition between the village Brahmins clinging to the old ritual religion and the city Brahmins catering to the needs of an urban population'.<sup>11</sup>

Following both Keith and Olivelle, this chapter will examine why brahmin composers would want to present their own ideas as authored by *kṣatriyas*. We will explore this issue within a more general *kṣatriya* orientation that, as will be demonstrated, characterises much of Upaniṣadic discourse. Indeed, *kṣatriyas* are not only important speakers in the texts, but also teachings are specifically linked to a number of characteristically *kṣatriya* concerns like defeating enemies and gaining political power. In this way, dialogues between kings and brahmins emphasise how both the presence of brahmins in the court, as well as Upaniṣadic teachings themselves, are indispensable to a king's political power. The claims made by *kṣatriya* characters do not represent a true expression of a *kṣatriya* voice, but rather *kṣatriya* characters embody brahmin idealisations about the position of king. Accordingly, the most important character traits of the Upaniṣadic king is that he is knowledgeable in Upaniṣadic discourse and generous in his hospitality to brahmins.

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<sup>10</sup> Keith 1989: 495.

<sup>11</sup> Olivelle 1992: 38.

### **C. Janaka and Yājñavalkya: Negotiating the brahmin's position in the court**

In the previous chapter we examined how the character of Yājñavalkya developed from an authoritative voice to the principal representative and founder of the Yajurvedic school. His dialogues with other brahmins, as well as with women, contribute to giving him a legendary status in Vedic literature that would serve as a prototype for the wise teacher and court priest in subsequent texts. Similarly, King Janaka of Videha achieves the status of the ideal Upaniṣadic king: he is cast both as the generous patron and the knowledgeable monarch. Janaka, who appears several times in the ŚB and JB, is known both for hosting philosophical tournaments and for participating in debates with brahmins, characteristics that are shared by other kings in the Upaniṣads. Central to his depiction as king is his personable relationship with Yājñavalkya. In the BU, Yājñavalkya's presence in his court establishes Janaka as a legitimate rival to the kings of Kuru-Pañcāla. Janaka and Yājñavalkya have several dialogues with each other and on a number of occasions they display their personable relationship through exchanging witty remarks. Indeed, Janaka's relationship with Yājñavalkya is an integral aspect of his power as king.

It is quite likely that legends about Janaka as a great king developed first and only later was his authority attributed to his relationship with Yājñavalkya. In the earlier dialogues that feature both characters, Janaka is depicted as superior in both his knowledge and his skill in debating. For example, in both the ŚB and JB Janaka is depicted teaching Yājñavalkya, and on one occasion he overtly out-talks him in a *brahmodya*.<sup>12</sup> However, by the time of the BU Yājñavalkya is clearly the superior of

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<sup>12</sup> Although the BU contains a number of dialogues in which *kṣatriyas* teach brahmins, it does not contain any dialogues where Yājñavalkya does not win. The BU, which expands the character of

the two and on one occasion the king even steps down from his throne and offers the brahmin his kingdom.

One of the salient features of the relationship between Janaka and Yājñavalkya is that the king gives generously to the brahmin. In the ŚB, Janaka gives one thousand cows to Yājñavalkya for his knowledge of the *mitravindā*.<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, in a dialogue from the BU, he offers Yājñavalkya one thousand cows every time he refutes the argument of another brahmin. Additionally, in a discussion about the *agnihotra*, Janaka gives him a hundred cows.<sup>14</sup> This particular occasion is interesting because, compared to similar episodes in the Upaniṣads, there is nothing in this teaching which makes this knowledge specifically related to the king. Janaka simply appears in a dialogue that otherwise assumes a ritual context. As we will see, an important innovation in Upaniṣadic teachings is that knowledge is increasingly framed for a *kṣatriya* audience. Nevertheless, even though this teaching does not promise any specific rewards to the king, Janaka gives Yājñavalkya one hundred cows. In these examples, Janaka is portrayed as much for his generosity as he is for his own knowledge.

A dialogue from the JB further develops Janaka's character as a generous patron.<sup>15</sup> In this episode five brahmins approach Janaka because he is already known to them as an expert on the *agnihotra*: 'Janaka, that king of Videha is well-informed about the *agnihotra*. He considers himself superior to us in the dispute. Come, we shall make him discuss the *agnihotra*'.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, although the king eventually teaches the brahmins, the narrative emphasises the gifts that Janaka bestows upon

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Yājñavalkya in a number of ways, does not want to portray him losing an argument with anyone, even if it is Janaka.

<sup>13</sup> ŚB 11.4.3.20

<sup>14</sup> ŚB 11.3.1.2.

<sup>15</sup> JB 1.22-5 (translation by Bodewitz 1973).

<sup>16</sup> JB 1.22.

them for their presence. After they are formally announced, the king prepares for them 'separate seats, separate (dishes of) water, separate *madhuparka* drinks, separate abodes'. Despite proving his superiority, Janaka nevertheless continues to be a generous host and pays the brahmins handsomely for their teachings. After every brahmin speaks, Janaka praises their words and proclaims that he will pay them for their knowledge: 'Well-offered! I must gratify you, gentlemen'. After they have spoken, Janaka again proves to be more knowledgeable as he is the only one who knows the goal of the *agnihotra*. The brahmins offer him a boon for his wisdom, but rather than accepting their gift Janaka offers them each one thousand cows and five hundred horses.

Significantly, even when he is the one doing the teaching, Janaka gives abundantly. This is an important detail shared throughout the dialogues between brahmins and kings: whether the brahmins are teachers or students, the brahmins get paid.<sup>17</sup> By showing that the brahmins receive generous rewards even when they lose arguments and assume the role of the student, these dialogues emphasise that it is the presence of the eminent brahmins that is most important and that in order to attract brahmins to their court kings had to pay lavishly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, when brahmins participate in philosophical tournaments they compete fiercely against each other for the patronage of kings. However, when brahmins discuss ideas with *kṣatriyas*, there is not the same competitiveness: brahmins get paid whether they are teachers or students and whether or not they win their philosophical debates.

Like Yājñavalkya, Janaka is not only known for his knowledge, but he is also depicted as clever in his debating tactics. This dialogue from the JB tells us that before

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<sup>17</sup> This is especially true of Janaka, as we will see in the following examples. Also, Aśvapati gives the brahmins who have come to study from him as much as he pays priests to perform a sacrifice (CU 5.11.5). Similarly, Ajātaśatru offers Gārgya one thousand cows but then ends up teaching the brahmin himself (BU 2.1).

he enters a discussion with them, Janaka shaved his head and beard, cut his nails and anointed his body, and approached them carrying a staff and wearing sandals. These details indicate that Janaka is preparing himself to be the student of the brahmins. However, when he enters into a discussion with them, he takes the initiative and asks the first question. The brahmins recognise that by means of this debating tactic, Janaka has out-talked them: 'You have indeed (again) out-talked us since you have taken the initiative and questioned us who are more than one'. The brahmins then, one by one, offer Janaka a teaching as a way to honour his superiority. Here, asking the first question is depicted as an important move whereby the king puts the visiting brahmins in the position of having to prove their knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by debating tactically, Janaka forces the brahmins to reveal their teachings.

Another dialogue between Janaka and Yājñavalkya shows how the king uses his ability to win a debate as way to secure the services of Yājñavalkya as his court priest.<sup>19</sup> In this story, Janaka encounters Yājñavalkya, Śvetaketu Āruṇeya, and Somaśuśma Sātyayajñi while they are driving around on chariots. Initially Janaka approaches the brahmins and asks for their expertise on how to perform the *agnihotra*. Although it is the king who approaches the brahmins, Janaka again manages to ask the first question, thus framing the course of their discussion and ensuring that they talk about something that the king knows. As we saw in the JB, the *agnihotra* is clearly a topic that Janaka knows about, so it is not surprising that again he begins the

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<sup>18</sup> Pravāhaṇa Jaivali is another king who employs this tactic in a debate with brahmins (CU 1.8.1-8). In the CU Pravāhaṇa establishes himself as superior to both Śilaka Śālāvatya and Caikitāyana Dālbhya in a discussion about the *sāman*. Similar to Janaka, he knows the importance of speaking first in a debate, as he is the first of the three to pose a question. Eventually Pravāhaṇa wins the argument, accusing both of them of lacking foundation in their teaching and threatening that their heads may shatter apart. The debate ends with the brahmins asking the king to be their teacher.

<sup>19</sup> ŚB 11.6.2.1.

discussion on this subject. After hearing each of the priests explain their method, Janaka rejects their knowledge, mounts his chariot and drives away.

Although Janaka rejects the teachings of all three brahmins, he clearly shows a preference for the method described by Yājñavalkya. Janaka tells Yājñavalkya that among the three priests he has inquired most closely into the *agnihotra* and as a reward gives him one hundred cows. However, the king points out that not even Yājñavalkya has a complete knowledge of the *agnihotra*. Nevertheless, Janaka, once again, is willing to pay handsomely even when he is more knowledgeable than the brahmins.

At this point in the narrative the brahmins acknowledge amongst themselves that Janaka has out-talked (*ati-vad*) them and they discuss whether they should challenge the king to a *brahmodya*. Both Śvetaketu and Sātyayajñi are eager to challenge Janaka because they do not want to be defeated in an argument by a king (*rājanya*). However, Yājñavalkya has reservations about challenging Janaka, precisely because he is a king: 'We are *brāhmaṇas* and he is a *rājanya*: if we were to vanquish him, whom should we say we had vanquished? But if he were to vanquish us, people would say of us that a *rājanya* had vanquished *brāhmaṇas*: do not think of this!'<sup>20</sup> Yet having said this, Yājñavalkya mounts his chariot and catches up with Janaka.<sup>21</sup> Bodewitz explains this seeming contradiction as Yājñavalkya rejecting a public debate in favour of a private instruction with Janaka.<sup>22</sup> This both saves Yājñavalkya the

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<sup>20</sup> ŚB 11.6.2.5.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that in this episode brahmins like Yājñavalkya, Śvetaketu and Sātyayajñi are all depicted riding chariots. As we have seen, Uddālaka Āruṇi also appears in a chariot when he is riding around the northern country of Madras (JUB 3.2.4.8; ŚB 2.4.1.6). Bodewitz has challenged Heesterman's suggestion that the connection between chariot driving and theological discussion might relate back to older ritual practices. Instead, he argues that there is no ritual connection and that chariots represent the luxury car of the Vedic elite. When we recall that brahmins commanded high rewards for their teachings, then it is not surprising that they traveled around on chariots (1974: 90).

<sup>22</sup> Bodewitz 1974: 89.

humiliation of being defeated by a king in public, as well as insures that he will not have to share the king's knowledge with his rival brahmins.

Yājñavalkya makes his approach by physically overtaking Janaka on his chariot. This incident highlights the competitive aspect of their discussion as their philosophical debate is likened to a chariot race.<sup>23</sup> When Yājñavalkya catches up to Janaka, the king then gives him further instruction about the *agnihotra*. After the king's teaching, Yājñavalkya admits that the king has a superior knowledge by offering him a boon. Importantly, this is the only occasion where Yājñavalkya is defeated in a debate. And significantly, he pays dearly as this defeat binds Yājñavalkya to surrendering his teaching services to the king. Thus, this dialogue not only displays Janaka's knowledge about the *agnihotra* but also shows how he uses this knowledge to win the services of a court priest. At the beginning of this dialogue Yājñavalkya is traveling about, presumably as a free-lance teacher, but by the end he is working for Janaka. As we will see, the link between their debate on the chariot and Yājñavalkya's subsequent position in Janaka's court is further developed in the BU. These episodes featuring Janaka suggest that kings could use their knowledge of Upaniṣadic discourse to attract brahmins to their court. Whereas debates among brahmins are competitive, with one's personal reputation at stake, discussions between brahmin and king serve as a negotiation for employment.

#### **D. Janaka and Yājñavalkya in the BU:**

The relationship between Janaka and Yājñavalkya is further developed in the fourth book of the BU, which contains three dialogues between the king and the brahmin. In

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<sup>23</sup> Bodewitz argues that this overtaking does not imply a chariot race (1974: 89). This is true in the sense that there is no reason to take this episode as a description of an actual race or of a ritual race. Nevertheless, metaphorically, the fact that both king and brahmin are featured on chariots adds competitive symbolism to their verbal dispute.



the first of these discussions, Yājñavalkya approaches the king while he is formally seated.<sup>24</sup> Janaka responds familiarly, asking if Yājñavalkya has come for cows or for a philosophical discussion. The ensuing dialogue, which we mentioned in the previous chapter, resembles a *brahmodya* that appears in early Buddhist literature. Yājñavalkya shows his superiority over six rival brahmins by rejecting their views as they are summarised by Janaka. Once again Janaka is cast as a generous patron, as after each view that Yājñavalkya defeats the king offers him a thousand cows and a bull as large as an elephant.

Throughout all three dialogues Yājñavalkya frames his teachings specifically for the interests of his royal audience, using many metaphors to link his discourses to the position of king. Yājñavalkya begins by comparing the importance of his teaching to the importance of a king equipping himself with a chariot (*ratha*) or a ship (*nāva*), and he ends this discussion by comparing the centrality of *prāṇa* in relation to the other vital functions to the centrality of the king among his ministers.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Yājñavalkya promises Janaka that this knowledge will help him defeat his enemies. As Yājñavalkya's livelihood relies on Janaka's patronage, it is not surprising that he packages his own teachings as vital to the king's power.

Additionally, this dialogue further establishes the particular connection between Janaka and the *brahmodya*. As we saw in the previous chapter, Janaka hosts philosophical tournaments as a means to display his political power. When he invites Yājñavalkya and the other brahmins to debate in his court, their confrontation is compared to Janaka's political struggles against both Kuru-Pañcāla and Kāśī. Interestingly, although it is Janaka's political struggles that this debate plays out, the

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<sup>24</sup> BU 4.1.1-7.

<sup>25</sup> BU 4.2.1; 4.3.38

king himself is not a contestant; he proves himself not by means of his own knowledge, but through the debating skills of his court priest. This is in contrast to the ŚB and JB where Janaka participates in verbal disputes himself, including two episodes where he is superior even to Yājñavalkya. In this dialogue in the BU, Janaka is once again associated with a *brahmodya*. In fact, he displays his understanding of Upaniṣadic discourse to Yājñavalkya by summarising the views of a number of brahmins. Nevertheless, it is Yājñavalkya, not Janaka himself, who refutes the teachings of the other brahmins. Whereas in the Brāhmaṇas Janaka's knowledge is presented as an important attribute of his character as an ideal king, in the BU he is more known for hosting *brahmodyas* than for participating in them.

The second dialogue between Janaka and Yājñavalkya appears to be a continuation of the first.<sup>26</sup> This encounter begins when Janaka gets down from his seat and approaches Yājñavalkya. This suggests that Janaka, who was formally seated at the beginning of the previous conversation, is so impressed by Yājñavalkya's answers that he steps down from his position of authority to recognise Yājñavalkya's superiority. At the end of this short dialogue, Janaka offers both himself and the people of Videha as the servants of Yājñavalkya. This further suggests that Janaka is, at least symbolically, stepping down as king to serve Yājñavalkya.

The final of these three dialogues refers back to their encounter on the chariots in the ŚB.<sup>27</sup> Yājñavalkya visits Janaka thinking that he is not going to reveal his knowledge to the king.<sup>28</sup> But then the narrative recalls the chariot episode where Yājñavalkya had granted Janaka the wish to ask him questions whenever he wanted. In this way, the BU mentions their previous debate to explain why Janaka can ask for a

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<sup>26</sup> BU 4.2.1-4.

<sup>27</sup> BU 4.3.1-4.4.25.

<sup>28</sup> Here Yājñavalkya resembles other reluctant teachers like Indra and Yama.

teaching even when Yājñavalkya is reluctant to disclose his knowledge: 'But once, when the two were engaged in a discussion about the daily fire sacrifice. Yājñavalkya had granted Janaka of Videha a wish. The wish he chose was the freedom to ask any question at will, and Yājñavalkya had granted it to him. So it was the king who now put the question to him first'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, although Yājñavalkya is reluctant to disclose all that he knows, only by sharing what he knows with the king does he become free from his boon to Janaka. That Yājñavalkya is bound by his previous boon is further indicated on several occasions throughout their discussion. Janaka periodically praises Yājñavalkya for his teachings, and even continues to offer him more cows, but the king insists that Yājñavalkya will have to further prove himself in order to be released from his boon: 'Quite right, Yājñavalkya. Here, sir, I'll give you a thousand cows! But you'll have to tell me more to get yourself released!'<sup>30</sup> At one point, Yājñavalkya acknowledges that the king is too intelligent to fool him with superficial answers: 'The king is really sharp! He has flushed me out of every cover'.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Yājñavalkya concludes his teaching by offering him the 'world of *brahman*'. Janaka then frees him by offering Yājñavalkya both himself and his people as his slaves.

These dialogues between Janaka and Yājñavalkya show Janaka as a generous king who is known for hosting the *brahmodya*. Additionally, these episodes play out the complex and mutually dependent relationship between king and court priest. As the king needs brahmins in his court to display his authority in political rivalries, the

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<sup>29</sup> BU 4.3.1.

<sup>30</sup> BU 4.3.14, 15, 16, 33 (*so'ham bhagavate sahasraṁ dadāmi; ata ūrdhvaṁ vimokṣāya brūhīti*) Many translators have assumed that Yājñavalkya is teaching Janaka how to attain final liberation (*mokṣa*). Radhakrishnan, for example translates this line: 'Sir, please instruct me further for the sake of my liberation' (1992: 259-60). Olivelle, taking into account the reference to the ŚB, translates this dialogue as a confrontation between priest and king, where Yājñavalkya is attempting to release himself from the wish he had granted to Janaka. Also, he points out that the term *mokṣa* or *vimokṣa* is not used in the Upanisads in connection with final liberation. See Olivelle (1996: 316 n.).

<sup>31</sup> BU 4.3.33.

priest needs the king for his own prestige, as well as his income. This dynamic between king the king and his court priest is also explored in theorisations about the *brahman* and *kṣatra* powers and emerging definitions of *dharma*. The BU explains that *brahman* created *dharma*, but that *dharma* is carried out by the king.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, this account claims that a brahmin should pay homage to a *kṣatriya* during the consecration ceremony, but that the brahmin should be regarded as the womb and the source of the king's political authority. Interestingly, the relationship between Janaka and Yājñavalkya displays a similar interdependence that nevertheless privileges the role of the priest. Although the BU presents Janaka as a powerful king, ultimately Yājñavalkya is portrayed as the source of his power.

#### **E. Kings as teachers: Aśvapati teaches a group of brahmin householders**

Aśvapati Kaikeya is another king known for both his hospitality to brahmins and his knowledge of Upaniṣadic discourse. Aśvapati only appears twice in Vedic literature, both times as instructing several brahmins. In the CU he is one of two kings who teaches the well-known Kuru-Pāṇcāla brahmin, Uddālaka Āruṇi. This dialogue begins with a group of wealthy and learned householders (*mahāśāla*) who want to know about *ātman* and *brahman*.<sup>33</sup> They decide to approach Uddālaka Āruṇi because he is known to study about the self which is common to all men (*ātman vaiśvānara*).<sup>34</sup> When they meet him, however, Uddālaka realises that he will not be able to answer

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<sup>32</sup> BU 1.4.11-15.

<sup>33</sup> CU 5.11.1-5.24.4. In the CU there names are: Prācīnaśāla Aupamanyava, Satyayajña Paulusi, Indrayumna Bhāllaveya, Jana Śārkarākṣya and Buḍila Āśvatarasvi. In the ŚB, Mahāśāla Jābāla appears instead of Prācīnaśāla Aupamanyava. It is important that the CU specifically designates these brahmins as householders (*mahāśāla*). We will explore this point further in the next chapter.

<sup>34</sup> Both Olivelle and Roebuck render *ātman vaiśvānara* as the 'self of all men'. Roebuck suggests that this term is not meant to refer to a specific doctrine of the self, but rather to a general understanding of the self: 'Later, the term is specialised to refer to just one form of the *ātman* (e.g. ManU 3) but here it seems to be used of the self in the widest sense' (Roebuck 2000: 193n.). As we will see, the primary reason for specifying what kind of self Aśvapati teaches about, is that it is in contradistinction to a similar dialogue in the ŚB where he teaches about the *agni vaiśvānara*.

them in a complete way. Accordingly, he advises that they all approach Aśvapati Kaikeya. When we recall what can happen to brahmins who claims to know more than they do, it is not surprising that Uddālaka suggests they all go to another teacher.

Importantly, Aśvapati receives the householders with due honour (*arhāṇi*). When he is about to perform a sacrifice, he announces that he will give the brahmin householders wealth (*dhana*) equal to what he gives the officiating priests. Again we see the dichotomy between brahmins who specialise in Upaniṣadic teachings and brahmins who perform sacrifices. As Aśvapati offers to pay these brahmin householders the same amount just for receiving a teaching from him as he is paying the ritual priests for actually performing a sacrifice, he shows his prejudice towards the householders; he is basically paying these brahmins to listen to him. As we have seen with Janaka and Yājñavalkya, it is in the interests of the king to act as a patron to eminent brahmins. And like Janaka, Aśvapati is willing to provide gifts for the brahmins even though he is the one doing the teaching. In both cases, brahmins are paid and honoured, not for their ability to teach a discourse, but for their authoritative presence and the opportunity they create for the king to display his own knowledge.

In the ŚB there is a different account of this story.<sup>35</sup> This version features Aruṇa Aupaveśi, rather than his son Uddālaka. Here, five brahmins are gathered at Aruṇa's house discussing *agni vaiśvānara*, but cannot agree. They then decide to ask Aśvapati Kaikeya. The ŚB also emphasises the hospitality of the king and recounts that the brahmins take up residence with him. When they go to Aśvapati, he arranges for them separate dwellings, separate honours and separate Soma sacrifices each with a thousand gifts. Importantly, although the king is equally generous, in this version his gifts to the brahmin householders are not contrasted with payment to brahmin

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<sup>35</sup> ŚB 10.6.1.1-11.

ritualists. Thus, the ŚB version, which is presented as part of the ritual, does not criticise ritual activity. The CU version, however, expands the narrative and explicitly contrasts knowledge about *ātman* with ritual performance. Not only are the brahmin householders given equal respect to the ritualists, but Aśvapati's teaching is about the self, rather than the sacrificial fire. In the CU, the *vaiśvānara* fire is recast as the *vaiśvānara* self, again emphasizing the shift away from a description of the sacrifice and presenting a teaching that focuses on the self.

Another important difference between these two presentations of this dialogue is how the characters of Uddālaka and his father are developed differently. In the ŚB Aruṇa is not differentiated from the other brahmins in the same way as Uddālaka in the CU. In the ŚB the brahmins are gathered together in Aruṇa's house, but they do not approach him specifically to learn from him. He is not necessarily teaching the other brahmins and their decision to go to Aśvapati is not due to his lack of knowledge, but rather because they cannot as a group come to an agreement.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to his father Aruṇa Kaikeya, Uddālaka Āruṇi is singled out as lacking in important knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Aśvapati's knowledge is highlighted when it is contrasted with Uddālaka Āruṇi and he is able to do what the eminent brahmin cannot do: teach about *ātman*.

Aśvapati's character as a king is more fully developed in other respects as well. His generosity is not only in relation to brahmins, but he is also cast as provider for his people. Both versions of the dialogue are in prose, yet there is a verse spoken by Aśvapati in the CU which characterises him as a great king: 'In my kingdom there are

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<sup>36</sup> This is following Eggelings rendering that *samiyāya* should be taken impersonally to mean that there was no argument among them. Sāyaṇa, however, interprets this passage to mean that Aruṇa was unable to instruct them (Eggeling 393: Vol 4: 1885).

<sup>37</sup> Although Uddālaka is once again cast as the ignorant brahmin, it is important to remember that he is presented in this role precisely because of his reputation as a respected teacher.

no thieves, no misers, no one who drinks; no one without learning or a sacred fire, no lecher, much less a whore!<sup>38</sup> Here we see an indication of an emerging ideal of the king as the moral protector of his kingdom. Similarly, another dialogue in the CU describes Jānaśruti Pautrāyaṇa as devoted to giving to and providing for his people.<sup>39</sup> He is known for giving cooked food and as having numerous hospices built. Both of these examples coincide with a passage from the BU, which equates *dharma* with the king and describes the king as protecting the weak from the strong.<sup>40</sup> Although these ideals are not particularly developed in the Upaniṣads, these attributes for a king become normative characteristics in the early Buddhist literature.<sup>41</sup>

#### **F. Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu: Instructions for how to seek patronage**

Another dialogue that highlights the social interaction between brahmins and kings is the story of king Pravāhaṇa and his discussion with Śvetaketu and Uddālaka Āruṇi. This episode where both Śvetaketu and his father visit the king occurs three times in the early Upaniṣads. The story, as it appears in all versions, has three basic components.<sup>42</sup> In the first part Śvetaketu arrives at the residence of the king, who asks him a number of questions. In the BU and CU the king is named Jaivali Pravāhaṇa, while in the KsU he is known as Citra Gāṅgyānani.<sup>43</sup> Unable to answer any of the king's questions, Śvetaketu leaves to return to his father, Uddālaka Āruṇi. In the second part, Śvetaketu has a short dialogue with his father where he explains that he could not answer any of the king's questions. Upon hearing this, Uddālaka decides to go to the king to learn from him. The third section consists of a dialogue between

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<sup>38</sup> CU 5.11.5.

<sup>39</sup> CU 4.1.1

<sup>40</sup> BU 1.4.14.

<sup>41</sup> Chakravarti 1996: 150-76.

<sup>42</sup> The three narrative sections are pointed out by Söhnen (1981: 179).

<sup>43</sup> Actually, in the CU his name appears the other way around, as Pravāhaṇa Jaivali.

Uddālaka and the king, where the king teaches him an important discourse. In both the BU and CU the king's teaching is about the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*), while in the KsU it is a discourse about the path after death.

At the end of this chapter we will return to King Pravāhaṇa and how his knowledge is specifically linked to his position as king. First, however, we will focus our attention on his dialogical partners, Śvetaketu and Uddālaka Āruṇi. An analysis of these characters will illustrate that the dialogues featuring kings are as much about the brahmins and how they should address the kings, as they are about the kings themselves. In this episode, Śvetaketu and Uddālaka offer two examples of brahmins who approach the king. Śvetaketu is rude and arrogant to both the king and his father, while Uddālaka is respectful and humble. Importantly, it is Uddālaka who wins favour in the eyes of the king and eventually learns how to overcome repeated death.

In his study of the different presentations of this story, Olivelle has concentrated on Śvetaketu and has shown how his character is presented differently in the three versions.<sup>44</sup> Olivelle points out that the BU casts Śvetaketu as an arrogant young brahmin who does not pay the proper respect to the king, describing him as the Vedic 'spoiled brat'. When Śvetaketu first arrives at the king's residence he interrupts Pravāhaṇa while he is eating, or perhaps even while entertaining female attendants.<sup>45</sup> This initial encounter depicts Śvetaketu barging in on the king abruptly, indicating that he does not know the proper etiquette for approaching the king. As Olivelle explains: 'Śvetaketu did not know his manners and barged into the presence of [Pravāhaṇa] during an inappropriate moment'.<sup>46</sup> The BU further characterises Śvetaketu as impolite by how he addresses the king. Rather than employ the honorific *bhagavaṇ*, as he does

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<sup>44</sup> Olivelle 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Olivelle argues that the grammatical form of *pari-car* as *paricārayamāṇam* refers to serving food, yet also has sexual connotations (1999: 58).

<sup>46</sup> Olivelle 1999: 58.



throughout the CU, Śvetaketu addresses the king with the word *bhoḥ*, which as Olivelle suggests, is similar to the modern colloquial word 'hey'.

The dialogue begins when Śvetaketu approaches the king and Pravāhaṇa asks the young brahmin a number of questions. When Śvetaketu cannot answer any of them, he refuses the king's invitation to stay at his court and hastily returns to his father. Considering the emphasis on the king's hospitality throughout this dialogue, Śvetaketu's rejection of the king's offer is a serious snub. In contrast to his father, Śvetaketu does not have the humility to stay with, and presumably learn from, the king. Śvetaketu's refusal to stay with the king is not only impolite, but is a flagrant breach of an important practice established throughout the dialogues. In all the other dialogues that we have examined, there is something at stake in the argument and the loser forfeits something to the winner. When Yājñavalkya loses an argument to Janaka, for example, he offers the king a boon and then is obliged to stay with Janaka at his court until he has fulfilled the terms and conditions of his boon. In contrast, Śvetaketu refuses to acknowledge the king's superiority and does not offer either a boon or himself as the king's student.

Śvetaketu's disrespectful behaviour continues when he returns to his father and accuses him of not teaching him properly. Uddālaka assures his son that he has taught him all that he knows and then suggests that they go to the king to learn from him together. Śvetaketu once again spurns the opportunity to receive instruction from the king and curtly tells his father to go on his own. Here, the rude Śvetaketu's is directly contrasted with his father who is both patient with his son and humble enough to learn from the king.

In many ways this dialogue is similar to other episodes where a brahmin, thinking himself knowledgeable, approaches a king only to eventually become his

student. In this situation, however, it is not merely the king's teaching that Śvetaketu does not know, but the young brahmin's behaviour illustrates that he does not know the proper ways to treat a king. As Olivelle argues, this interpretation adds another meaning to Pravāhaṇa's first question to the young brahmin: 'Did your father teach you?'<sup>47</sup> Pravāhaṇa's question not only calls into question Śvetaketu's discursive knowledge, but also brings attention to the young brahmin's lack of understanding of proper behaviour.

As Śvetaketu's encounter with Pravāhaṇa is an example of how not to treat a king, Uddālaka's dialogue outlines a number of gestures that both brahmins and kings should observe to negotiate patronage. The BU account tells us that when Uddālaka arrives at the court, Pravāhaṇa gives him the appropriate reception for a brahmin guest by giving him a seat and providing water for him. Subsequently, 'he present[s] him with the refreshments due to an honored guest'.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, other dialogues in the Upaniṣads also emphasise the proper procedure for receiving guests, especially brahmin guests. As we have seen, Aśvapati receives his guests with due honour and the KaU specifically relates that offering water is an important way to appease a brahmin.<sup>49</sup> These examples do not merely illustrate how a host should receive a guest, but in all three of these episodes the host is a *kṣatriya* and the guest is a brahmin. Even though these particular *kṣatriyas* end up as teachers to their brahmin guests, the dialogues nevertheless emphasise that the brahmins are treated properly. The KaU warns that if the proper respects are not paid to a brahmin, then the host will have to suffer the consequences: 'Hopes and expectations, fellowship and goodwill, children

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<sup>47</sup> BU 6.2.1.

<sup>48</sup> BU 6.2.4.

<sup>49</sup> CU 5.11.5; KaU 1.7. Importantly, the particular reception described in the CU is part of the traditional way of receiving guests as outlined in the Gṛhyasūtras: Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra 1.24.7; Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra 1.3.1. See Olivelle for further discussion (1999: 60-1).

and livestock, rites and gifts – all these a brahmin wrests from the foolish man, in whose house he resides without any food'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, these dialogues not only address how brahmins should treat kings, but also how kings should receive brahmins.

After receiving him and giving him the proper refreshments, Pravāhaṇa offers Uddālaka a wish (*vara*). Similarly, in the CU version, the king offers Uddālaka a gift (*vara*) of human riches.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, offering a wish is another important aspect of receiving a guest that appears in a number of dialogues. As we have seen, this is part of Yama's hospitality for Naciketas, as he grants three wishes after Naciketas had stayed in his house for three nights without food.<sup>52</sup> These examples further illustrate the point that even when the king is depicted as more knowledgeable than a brahmin, the brahmin should be received respectfully.

The contrasting receptions that Pravāhaṇa gives to Śvetaketu and Uddālaka also points to how brahmins have to act as guests to deserve their characteristically generous welcome. Uddālaka's interaction with the king shows both his humility and knowledge of the proper protocol, and crucially it is specifically because Uddālaka behaves properly that he earns the opportunity to learn one of the most coveted teachings in the Upaniṣads. Uddālaka responds to the king's offer of a wish by asking to know what he had taught Śvetaketu. Again, like Yama in the KaU, Pravāhaṇa is reluctant to part with his knowledge, explaining that to ask for knowledge is a divine wish and Uddālaka should ask for something of the human sort.<sup>53</sup> Again, reminiscent of Naciketas, Uddālaka rejects human riches and demands to know the 'infinite and boundless'. Uddālaka refuses the offer of material wealth in favour of learning an Upaniṣadic teaching.

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<sup>50</sup> KaU 1.8.

<sup>51</sup> KaU CU 5.3.6.

<sup>52</sup> KaU 1.9.

<sup>53</sup> BU 6.2.6.

Pravāhaṇa responds that he will instruct Uddālaka, but only if Uddālaka asks in the proper manner. Consequently, Uddālaka formally requests to become Pravāhaṇa's student. The BU emphasises the importance of proper protocol by connecting the interaction between Uddālaka and Pravāhaṇa to traditional practices. When Uddālaka finally announces that he is coming to Pravāhaṇa as his student, the text relates: 'With just these words did the people of old place themselves as pupils under a teacher. And Gautama lived there openly as a pupil'.<sup>54</sup> Pravāhaṇa finally teaches Uddālaka, saying 'for who can refuse you when you speak like that'.<sup>55</sup>

These words further illustrate that it is Uddālaka's mode of behaviour that convinces the king to teach him. That Uddālaka can impress Pravāhaṇa enough for the king to reveal his knowledge is especially pronounced given the context of this dialogue. It is immediately before agreeing to teach Uddālaka that the king announces that this knowledge had never before reached the brahmins. Thus, despite the secrecy that the king claims is involved in the transmission of this knowledge, Pravāhaṇa is so impressed by Uddālaka's speech and actions that he cannot refuse to teach him.

#### **G. Conflicting agendas of how kings should teach brahmins:**

Thus far we have concentrated on the BU version of this story, which is the only presentation that overtly contrasts the mode of behaviour between Uddālaka and his son Śvetaketu. One of the ways that the CU differs from the BU account is that it does not describe the interaction between Pravāhaṇa and Uddālaka in as much detail and ultimately, even though the brahmin learns from the king, he does not officially become his student. Instead of asking Uddālaka to become his student, Pravāhaṇa

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<sup>54</sup> BU 6.2.7.

<sup>55</sup> BU 6.2.8. Another point that this dialogue seems to be making is that a king can trust brahmins with political secrets.

invites him to stay a while longer. It is at this point in the CU account that Pravāhaṇa announces that his teaching is known exclusively by *kṣatriyas*. Without initiating him as his student, the king begins to teach Uddālaka.

Although these versions do not come to the same conclusion about Uddālaka's status as a student, they both show a negotiation process which establishes the grounds on which the brahmin becomes part of the king's court. In both versions the king receives Uddālaka respectfully and offers him a gift. And in both accounts Uddālaka refuses material wealth for the sake of learning the king's discourse. In this way, although the characters are presented differently, both versions of the dialogue emphasise the formal interaction between the king and brahmin as an integral aspect of Upaniṣadic knowledge.

The KsU account differs significantly from both the BU and CU. It is much shorter and none of the characters are portrayed in as much detail. The KsU is the only version of the story that provides an explanation for why Śvetaketu arrives at the king's residence in the first place. The narrative tells us that the king was about to perform a sacrifice and had chosen Uddālaka as his officiating priest, but that Uddālaka sent his son in his place. Additionally, the entire episode where the king receives Uddālaka is absent and no negotiation takes place between Uddālaka and Citra. Instead the brahmin initially approaches the king with firewood asking to become his pupil and Citra receives him as a wise teacher, responding: 'Gautama, you have proved yourself worthy of the formulation of truth (*brahman*), since you have not succumbed to pride. Come, I'll see to it that you perceive it clearly'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Citra does not present his teaching as exclusive to the *kṣatriyas* or as the explanation

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<sup>56</sup> KsU 1.1.

for the *kṣatriya* monopoly over rulership. More generally, after Citra has taught Uddālaka he says that this knowledge will win him victory and success.<sup>57</sup>

One of the most significant differences among the three versions regards whether or not Uddālaka is properly initiated as a Vedic student. In both the BU and KsU, Uddālaka officially becomes Pravāhaṇa's student, while in the CU he does not. Importantly, there are other examples where the CU version of a dialogue differs from other presentations regarding the issue of initiation. For example, in the ŚB version of Aśvapati's teaching, he initiates the brahmins as students, yet in the CU he does not. As Olivelle has argued, these differences in the narrative reflect the conflicting agendas between the BU and CU, and to a lesser extent, the KsU.<sup>58</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the CU, which places more emphasis on the teacher/student relationship, makes a point to differentiate between dialogues with teachers and students and those with brahmins and kings. As we have seen, even when Satyakāma and Upakosala learn Upaniṣadic discourses that give them the 'glow' of one who knows about brahman, because they learned these teachings from non-traditional sources they have to learn the same teachings again from their official teachers to be truly knowledgeable. Similarly, although the CU presents Uddālaka Āruṇi twice learning from kings, on neither occasion does he officially become their student. The implication is that Uddālaka can learn from kings, just as Śvetaketu can learn from a fire, but in neither case will this knowledge alone give them their status as a brahmin.

In contrast, the BU, which more fully develops the relationship between king and court priest, emphasises the interaction between Uddālaka and Pravāhaṇa. While the BU champions Yājñavalkya, who is somewhat of a maverick, it has no problem

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<sup>57</sup> KsU 1.7.

<sup>58</sup> Olivelle 1999.

showing traditional Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins officially become the students of kings. This is not surprising because the BU is generally more critical of Kuru-Pañcāla orthodoxy. However, despite these differences between the terms under which kings teach brahmins, there is no clear distinction among the early Upaniṣads in the presentation of the ideal king. In both the BU and CU the king is presented as knowledgeable and generous, and in both texts kings teach brahmins. Furthermore, both texts claim that knowledge of Upaniṣadic discourse is directly responsible for political power. This is illustrated both by the ability of knowledgeable kings to attract eminent brahmins to their courts, as well as explicit promises that Upaniṣadic knowledge will deliver to kings a favorable reputation, military success and even immortality.

#### **H. Ajātaśatru and the political rivalry between Kāśī and Videha:**

Another example of a king who formally instructs a brahmin is the story of Ajātaśatru. The dialogue between Ajātaśatru and Gārgya is a typical Upaniṣadic story of a brahmin who initially approaches a king to give him an instruction, but finds the king to be the more knowledgeable and ends up becoming his student. As we saw in the debate in Janaka's court, Yājñavalkya's sparring with Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins is linked to Janaka's competition as an eastern king with political rivals from the west. Ajātaśatru is another king who employs Upaniṣadic discourses in his competition with his political rivals. We encounter Ajātaśatru twice in the early Upaniṣads as his dialogue with Gārgya appears both in the BU and the KsU.<sup>59</sup>

The dialogue begins when Gārgya approaches Ajātaśatru and offers to tell a formulation of truth (*brahman*). Ajātaśatru replies enthusiastically and proclaims that

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<sup>59</sup> BU 2.1.1-2.1.20; KsU 4.1-4.20.

he will give Gārgya one thousand cows for the teaching.<sup>60</sup> The Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad further characterises Gārgya as a man who is learned (*anūcāna*) and widely traveled (*saṁspaṣṭa*).<sup>61</sup> This suggests that Gārgya is well qualified to teach because he had visited places like Kuru-Pañcāla which were known for their Vedic learning. It also further characterises Ajātaśatru as an influential king, as he is able to attract, and eventually defeat a learned and widely traveled brahmin.

Ajātaśatru accepts Gārgya's offer because he recognises that learning such a teaching would enhance his reputation, specifically in relation to Janaka, king of Videha. He proclaims that by accepting Gārgya's offer to teach him: 'People are sure to rush here, crying, "Here's a Janaka, here's a Janaka"'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, this story depicts the king as seeking Upaniṣadic teachings explicitly because it is related to his own political reputation and power.

Ajātaśatru's attempt to compare himself with Janaka not only shows the political importance of Upaniṣadic teaching, but further brings out the particular rivalry between Kāśi and Videha. This rivalry is also articulated by Gārgī Vācakanvī when she is debating against Yājñavalkya in Janaka's court. When she questions Yājñavalkya on the second occasion she compares her challenge to a 'fierce warrior of Kāśi or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, rising to challenge his enemy'.<sup>63</sup>

Although the BU generally describes Yājñavalkya's opponents as brahmins from Kuru-Pañcāla, Gārgī's challenge suggests that she herself might be from Kāśi. As Gārgī presents her own challenge as representing a fight between Videha and Kāśi,

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<sup>60</sup> It is significant that the number of cows is the same amount that Janaka offers to Yājñavalkya. However, unlike the cows offered to Yājñavalkya, the cows offered to Gārgya are not adorned with gold.

<sup>61</sup> See Olivelle's note p. 371.

<sup>62</sup> BU 2.1.1; KsU 4.1.

<sup>63</sup> BU 3.8.2.



she indicates that, as Yājñavalkya is associated with Videha, she is a warrior from Kāśi. This, perhaps, could further explain why Gārgī is cast in a different light from Yājñavalkya's other opponents. That Gārgī has a particular connection to Kāśi is important because her name suggests that she is related to the Gārgya who is teaching Ajātaśatru, the king of Kāśi. Witzel suggests that Gārgī's name makes her a member of the Gārga family, indicating that she would 'represent the (originally) more Western schools like the one to which Uddālaka belonged'.<sup>64</sup> Although her family may have originally come from the west, these two examples suggest that this name is associated with Kāśi.<sup>65</sup> In any case, in this dialogue Ajātaśatru sees the opportunity to exploit Gārgya's teachings and his presence in the court to serve in the political rivalry between Kāśi and Videha.

### I. Ajātaśatru: Upaniṣadic knowledge as a political discourse

Another aspect of this dialogue is that it contrasts the Vedic ritualism of Gārgya with Ajātaśatru's teaching that is oriented towards the self. When Gārgya approaches Ajātaśatru and offers to teach him, he makes a number of connections between *brahman* and *puruṣa* in the moon (*candra*), lightning (*vidyut*), space (*ākāśa*), wind (*vāyu*), fires (*agni*), water (*apsu*), a mirror (*ādarśa*), sound (*śabda*), the quarters (*dikṣa*), a shadow (*chāyāmaya*) and the body (*ātman*).<sup>66</sup> In the KsU, Gārgya's discourse is presented in the typical division of ritual speculation between the divine (*daivata*) and bodily (*ātman*) spheres. After every attempt to link *brahman* with the inner *puruṣa*, Ajātaśatru responds by rejecting the comparison and offering a different

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<sup>64</sup> Witzel 1987: 403.

<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the rivalry between Kāśi and Videha is attested to in Buddhist sources, where Kāśi was considered a colony of Videha.

<sup>66</sup> Gārgya's name is also Dīpta-Bālāki, which can mean 'the proud Bālāki'. Olivelle comments that it is unclear whether *dīpta* is part of his name or merely an epithet (1996: 302 n.).

viewpoint. Ajātaśatru responds to each point with a sarcastic comment, saying ‘don’t even talk to me about that’.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the interaction between Ajātaśatru and Gārgya resembles the verbal exchanges of a *brahmodya*.

Finally, Ajātaśatru rejects Gārgya’s teaching when he further mocks him, asking: ‘Is that all’.<sup>68</sup> Gārgya then asks Ajātaśatru to be his teacher. After accepting him as his student, the king then takes Gargya by the hand and points out to him a man who is sleeping. By means of bringing Gārgya’s attention to this sleeping man, Ajātaśatru instructs him about the process of sleeping and dreaming and how *prāṇa* behaves in the body during these processes. Importantly, Ajātaśatru’s teaching style and what he is teaching about are entirely different from Gārgya’s discourse. Whereas Gārgya’s teaching is based on knowing the connections between the sacrifice and the cosmos, Ajātaśatru’s knowledge is based on observation of the natural processes that take place in the body; he uses the concrete example of a sleeping man to explain the processes of sleeping and dreaming. As we have seen, Upaniṣadic discourse marks a shift in the general orientation of knowledge from ritual symbolism to an interest in different bodily and mental states. Accordingly, this dialogue contrasts the brahmin’s ritual symbolism with the king’s understanding of the processes of life and death.

Furthermore, Ajātaśatru employs a number of metaphors to explicitly link his discourse to his position as king. When Ajātaśatru responds to Gārgya’s arguments, almost every one of his counter claims emphasises the rewards of this knowledge and many of the metaphors are related to power and ruling. For example, he says that if one venerates Indra Vaikuṇṭha he will become victorious (*aparājayaṣṇu*), invincible

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<sup>67</sup> BU 2.1.3-13. (*mā maitasmīn samvadiṣṭhāhi*). Olivelle equates this phrase with modern vernacular quips like ‘Give me a break!’ (1999: 66).

<sup>68</sup> KsU 4.19.

(*anyatatyajāyī*) and triumph over his enemies.<sup>69</sup> In the KsU version of this dialogue, the king states: 'To this self (*ātman*) cling these other selves (*ātman*), as to a chieftain (*śreṣṭha*) his own people'.<sup>70</sup> Then Ajātaśatru asserts that knowledge of *ātman* led Indra to defeating the demons: 'When he came to know it, he smashed the demons, conquered them, and secured the supremacy (*śraīṣṭhya*), sovereignty (*svārājya*), and lordship (*ādhipatyā*) over all beings'.<sup>71</sup>

Later, when Ajātaśatru begins his instruction he teaches that when a person is asleep the cognitive powers of the *prāṇas* are in the control of the *puruṣa*.<sup>72</sup> During the time of sleep, breath (*prāṇa*), speech (*vāc*), sight (*cakṣu*), hearing (*śrota*), and mind (*manas*) all remain in the grasp of the *puruṣa* in the heart. Ajātaśatru then explains how this affects dreams. A dream is the *puruṣa* moving around the body with the vital powers. Wherever the *puruṣa* may travel in his dreams, those regions become his worlds. Importantly, King Ajātaśatru compares the movement of *puruṣa* around the body during dreaming to a king taking his people with him around his domain (*janapada*). This metaphor shows that just like the king, who controls his kingdom and is therefore free to roam around his kingdom at will, the *puruṣa* moves freely around the body. Throughout Ajātaśatru's teaching, he presents *prāṇa*, *puruṣa* and the processes of life as a political discourse that can secure rewards that are particularly desirable to the king. Thus, Gārgya's teaching, which is centred on the sacrificial arena, is rejected and replaced with a discourse about *ātman*, which is centred on the king and his court.

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<sup>69</sup> KsU 4.7 (also BU 2.1.6)

<sup>70</sup> KsU 4.20.

<sup>71</sup> KsU 4.20.

<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, in the BU version of this dialogue the word *ātman* does not occur. Rather, *puruṣa* is described as the site where the *prāṇas* gather together, a description often associated with *ātman*.

Throughout the early Upaniṣads there are a number of other examples where teachings are equated with political power and where there are metaphors which explicitly link knowledge with overcoming enemies and conquering territory. The BU states that one who knows the importance of food will become the patron (*bhartṛ*), chief (*śreṣṭha*), leader (*pura*), eater of food (*annāda*) and sovereign (*adhipati*): ‘And if anyone among his people tries to become a rival of someone who knows this, that man will be incapable of supporting even his own dependents. On the other hand, anyone who follows him, as well as anyone who, while following him, wishes to support his own dependents, becomes capable of supporting them’.<sup>73</sup> Here, knowledge is explicitly equated with leadership and bringing harm to one’s enemies.

Similarly, the BU states that if one venerates the *gāyatrī* he can win territory extending as far as the three worlds, extending as far as the triple Veda or extending as far as there are living beings.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, he can direct his knowledge against someone he hates.<sup>75</sup> The KsU has a *mantra* addressing the moon which expresses the wish that it should not swell up by means of one’s own lifebreath, children and livestock, but that the moon should swell up with the lifebreath, children and livestock of the ones he hates.<sup>76</sup> As the moon was considered the destination of people when they die, one who knows this *mantra* can avoid their own death, while bringing on the destruction of his enemies. Further on, this Upaniṣad states that if one knows *brahman* the people who hate him and the people whom he hates will die around him.<sup>77</sup> The TU has a passage which states that if one venerates *brahman* his rivals will be filled with

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<sup>73</sup> BU 1.3.18.

<sup>74</sup> BU 5.14.1-3.

<sup>75</sup> BU 5.14.7.

<sup>76</sup> KsU 2.8. Throughout Vedic literature, the moon is depicted as where people go when they die. As we will see in Pravāhaṇa’s teaching, those who go to the moon and make it swell up are not released from the karmic cycle, but return to the earth again as rain. Thus, knowing the *mantra* not only brings death to one’s enemies, but further ensures that they do not escape the karmic cycle to become immortal.

<sup>77</sup> KsU 2.12

hate and die around him, along with his detestable foes.<sup>78</sup> The CU proclaims that anyone who contemplates evil against one who knows the *udgītha* will be ‘smashed to bits like a clod hurled against a rock’.<sup>79</sup> These examples show how brahmin composers explicitly situate Upaniṣadic discourses within the competitive and violent context of conflicts between *kṣatriya* leaders. Although the actual dialogues between brahmins and kings are not as antagonistic as the contests among brahmins, the teachings address the political and military battles between kings. In this way, Upaniṣadic discourses are represented as necessary for political success.

In addition to Upaniṣadic discourses which equate knowledge with specific political rewards, there are a number of passages where the king is conceptualised as qualitatively related to *ātman*. These passages do not merely suggest that the king should know about *ātman*, but that the king has a similar relationship to the social world as does the *ātman* to the body or to the ontological sphere. In the ŚB, *ātman* was already equated with political power, a tendency that continues in the BU, which equates the *ātman* with the lord (*adhipati*) and king (*rājā*) of all beings.<sup>80</sup> Both the king and *ātman* are like the hub of a wheel (*cakra*) to which are fastened all beings, all gods, the breaths (*prāṇā*) and the bodies (*ātman*). In a similar passage in the KsU, Indra teaches that *prāṇa* is like the hub of a chariot wheel to which are fastened all the particles of intelligence. Subsequently, *prāṇa* is equated with *ātman*, which is described as the guardian (*pāla*) of the world, the sovereign of the world (*adhipati*) and the lord (*iśa*) of the world.<sup>81</sup> In these metaphors, the king and *ātman* reinforce each other as they are mutually conceptualised as that which is at the centre of the human or

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<sup>78</sup> TU 3.10.4

<sup>79</sup> CU 1.2.8.

<sup>80</sup> BU 2.5.15.

<sup>81</sup> KsU 3.8. Similarly, in the TU the *puruṣa* within the heart is compared to a king. When *puruṣa* obtains sovereignty (*svārājya*) over the other organs of sense he becomes lord (*pati*) (TU 1.6.2).

political body. As *ātman* is the centre of the ontological sphere, the king is the heart of the social world. In this respect, it is important to recall that in numerous discussions in the early Upaniṣads, *ātman* is described in terms of the body, what keeps it alive and how it dies. In these examples, the entire discourse about *ātman* as a living organism is presented within the metaphors of power and rulership.

**J. The battle of the *prāṇas* as a political metaphor:**

The connection between knowledge of the self and the political success of the king is further developed in the recurring myth of the competition among the *prāṇas*. The battle among the *prāṇas* is the myth that is presented most in the early Upaniṣads.<sup>82</sup> As Bodewitz points out, this myth first appears in the later Brāhmaṇa literature, yet in its initial occurrences there is no connection with kingship.<sup>83</sup> Throughout the early Upaniṣads, however, this myth is consistently presented as a political metaphor where the superiority of the *prāṇa* in relation to the other vital functions is likened to the superiority of the king among his rivals and ministers. Significantly, this myth is always presented as a competition where *prāṇa* is not just identified with the king, but has to prove his superiority against the other vital functions. All the different vital powers make claims to their superiority and only after they leave the body is it evident that their power is not vital to keeping the body alive. When *prāṇa* leaves the body, however, its absence disrupts the workings of the other vital powers and they admit to the superiority of *prāṇa*.

One of the ways that the Upaniṣads give *prāṇa* a political dimension is through equating breath with food. In the sacrificial literature, food is an important political

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<sup>82</sup> This myth appears at CU 5.1.6-5.2.2; and BU 1.5.21; 6.1.1-14; KsU 2.13; 3.3; PU 2.1-4; as well as SĀ 9.

<sup>83</sup> Bodewitz further claims that the kingship of *prāṇa* was originally a theme of the Sāmaveda that was then developed in the BU (1992: 54).

metaphor, where the prosperous king is given the epithet ‘eater of food’.<sup>84</sup> The BU and CU both directly equate breath with food, thus connecting the older discourse of the king as eater of food with the new teaching that the king is the controller of the vital functions.<sup>85</sup> In the CU there is a version of this contest when the vital powers go to Prajāpati to settle their argument about which of them is the greatest. Prajāpati tells them: ‘The one, after whose departure the body appears to be in the worst shape, is the greatest among you’.<sup>86</sup> Eventually *prāṇa* wins this contest and the narrative tells us that for a man who knows this there is nothing but food. In the very next section there is a description about how to make a mixture which will give a man the ability to rule.

The connection between the *prāṇa* myth and making this mixture is significant because these passages appear together in both the BU and CU, as well as the SĀ.<sup>87</sup> This myth is explicitly connected with a particular ritual that promises political superiority, indicating that this myth is not only a description of a political situation, but also is considered something that a king must know in order to achieve political success.

In fact, the myth itself often explicitly promises political rewards. In one of the versions in the BU, those who learn the discourse become victorious in their own family and their rivals die.<sup>88</sup> Also in the BU there is a similar version of the contest among the vital organs about who can sing the high chant (*udgītha*).<sup>89</sup> Once again, knowledge of the *prāṇa* myth is equated with political power: ‘When someone comes to know this, his people will gather around him in the same way; he will become their

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<sup>84</sup> For a further discussion see Smith (1990). Also, we will discuss this metaphor more in the section about Pravāhaṇa and the teaching of the five fires.

<sup>85</sup> BU 6.1.14: ‘When a man knows in this way that breath is food – nothing he eats becomes an improper food’. Satyakāma teaches that breath is food (CU 5.2.3). Also see TU 1.5.

<sup>86</sup> CU 5.1.7.

<sup>87</sup> SĀ 9; CU 5.1-2; BU 6.1-3.

<sup>88</sup> BU 1.5.21-23.

<sup>89</sup> BU 1.3.17.

patron (*bhartṛ*), their chief (*śreṣṭha*), and their leader (*pura*); he will become an eater of food (*annāda*) and a sovereign (*adhipati*)'. In these examples, the battle of the *prāṇas* is explicitly cast as a political myth, the knowledge of which promises real-world political advantages.

Other versions do not address the king directly, but encourage people to unite behind him. The KsU suggests that aligning oneself with the king leads to heaven and immortality. One passage describes a body, which emptied of all *prāṇas*, lays like a dog withering without breath.<sup>90</sup> The *prāṇas* enter one by one, but the body continues to lie prostrate. Finally, when breath enters, the body immediately stands up. After the other *prāṇas* recognise the pre-eminence of *prāṇa*, they can go to heaven. The narrative then proclaims that a person who understands the superiority of the *prāṇa* and unites himself with the *prāṇa* can reach heaven. As the *prāṇa* is often a metaphor for the king, this suggests that anyone who aligns himself with the king, will reach heaven.

The social context which is most explicitly linked with the battle of the *prāṇas* is the relationship between the king and the court. In one discussion, Yājñavalkya teaches Janaka that the vital functions throng around *ātman* like the soldiers (*ugrā*), magistrates (*pratyenasa*), equerries (*sūta*), and village headman (*grāmaṇi*) throng around the king when he is about to depart. Similarly, the ŚB says the metres act as attendants to Soma like those who attend a king: 'The metres act as attendants about him; even as the non-royal king-makers, the heralds and headman (attend upon) the king, so do the metres act as attendants about him (Soma)'. This passage is connected with the image of the living body as a healthy political body. Although the ministers provide important political functions, only the presence of the king is necessary to

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<sup>90</sup> KsU 2.13. Here the *prāṇas* are called *devas*.



keeping the political body alive. The JUB also has a discussion of *prāṇa* which links *prāṇa* to kingship, and makes a connection between the vital functions and the king's ministers.<sup>91</sup> The five vital powers and the corresponding cosmic powers are described as a courtly assembly (*sabhā*) in the body. In this metaphor *prāṇa* represents the king who is assisted by the assembly of the other vital powers.

The importance of this myth throughout the early Upaniṣads suggests that this scenario represents a real political situation. Although there is much that we do not know about the court as an institution in this period in early historic India, nevertheless, it is clear that the this myth describes the dynamics between the king and his ministers.<sup>92</sup> In this respect, it is interesting that the battle among the *prāṇas* is presented as an internal struggle. As we have seen, most other references to political rivalries are directed against external enemies. These mythical accounts suggest not only the centrality of the king, but also that the king, like the *prāṇa*, continually has to prove his superiority to his ministers.

In this respect, it is significant that the *prāṇa* myth connects the relationship between the king and his ministers to the process of dying. As we have seen, these myths include explicit descriptions of the ministers gathering around the king as he is about to die, suggesting that these mythical accounts address the problem of passing political authority. We do not know how the position of king was decided in Upaniṣadic times, but these passages suggest that when the king dies there is a competition among his ministers. Perhaps the gathering around the king was some

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<sup>91</sup> JUB 2.10-11.

<sup>92</sup> Several scholars have attempted to define the institution of the court in Upaniṣadic times (Rau 1957; Sharma 1999; Drekmeier 1962). However, connecting the Upaniṣads with a specific conceptualization of the court is difficult because the terminology employed by the texts to describe the residence of the king is ambiguous. For example, all three versions of the story of Uddālaka, Śvetaketu and Pravāhaṇa/Citra use different terms to refer to the residence of the king. The BU uses the word *pariṣad*, the CU uses *saṃiti*, and the KsU uses *sadas*. Furthermore, the CU refers to Prajāpati's court as the *sabhā* (CU 8.14.1). Although our understanding of the specific nature and workings of the Upaniṣadic court remains inconclusive, the myth of the *prāṇas* clearly shows a courtly orientation.

kind of succession ritual or the position of king was actually negotiated among the *sabhā*. In any case, although these descriptions do not actually tell us how the king's authority was passed, the *prāṇa* mythology establishes a connection between Upaniṣadic discourse and the process of transmitting political authority.

**K. Pravāhaṇa and the teaching of the five fires:**

In his appearance with Śvetaketu and Uddālaka, Pravāhaṇa personifies the characteristics of the ideal Upaniṣadic king: he is both generous to brahmins and knowledgeable in Upaniṣadic discourse. At the beginning of this dialogue, Pravāhaṇa poses a question that is of central concern throughout the Upaniṣads: 'Do you know where people go from here when they die?'<sup>93</sup> Indeed, it is Pravāhaṇa's answer to this question that he claims is the knowledge that originated among the royalty. As we discussed earlier, Pravāhaṇa's claim to authorship does not represent a historical reality, yet it does show an attempt by the brahmin composers of this story to present this teaching as explicitly important to kings. In fact, throughout the early Upaniṣads, discourses that address this question are especially featured in dialogues between brahmins and kings. For example, before one of his teachings to Janaka, Yājñavalkya asks the king a similar question: 'So can you tell me where you go when you leave this world'.<sup>94</sup> Importantly, these dialogues between brahmins and kings about death are presented as a political discourse that address the king's ability to achieve immortality.

Pravāhaṇa's teaching of the five fires explains human existence as a natural process that is interconnected with other forms of life. Human life is described as part

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<sup>93</sup> CU 5.3.2.

<sup>94</sup> BU 4.2.1.

of a cycle of regeneration, whereby the essence of life takes on different forms as it passes through different levels of existence. Pravāhaṇa's teaching begins by comparing five aspects of the world with a fire: the world up there (*asau loka*), a rain cloud (*parjanya*), the world down there (*ayam loka*), a man (*puruṣa*) and a woman (*yoṣā*). In Pravāhaṇa's teaching, the world up there (the first fire) refers to the moon, which throughout Vedic literature symbolises death, as it was considered the destination of humans when they die. According to Pravāhaṇa, however, the moon is not the final destination, because the deceased return to the earth in the form of rain (the second fire). When rain reaches the earth (the third fire), it nourishes the soil to produce food. Food is then eaten by men (the fourth fire), in whose bodies it is transformed into semen. Semen is then passed into women (the fifth fire) through sexual intercourse.

Pravāhaṇa teaches that people who understand this process will avoid repeated death. Importantly, the goal of escaping repeated death (*punarmṛtyu*) was already associated with the king in royal rituals, a number of which promised that the king would not die again.<sup>95</sup> In the Upaniṣads, however, this goal is achieved through knowledge: an understanding of Pravāhaṇa's teaching leads to freedom from the endless cosmic cycle. The only link in this chain of existence that can be altered, however, is what happens at the time of death. As Pravāhaṇa explains, when the deceased reach the moon they become the food of gods. There, the gods feed on them, addressing the moon as King Soma and saying, 'Increase, decrease'.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> AB 8.25; ŚB 11.5.6.9; 10.4.3.9.

<sup>96</sup> BU 6.2.16. Ajātaśatru's teaching is also linked to this understanding of the process of regeneration. When Ajātaśatru is teaching Gārgya, he addresses the sleeping man by saying: 'O Soma, great king dressed in white'. It remains unclear exactly why Ajātaśatru would address the man in this way. However, it is significant that these are exactly the words of the gods when they are feasting, as described by Pravāhaṇa's teaching. This suggests that Ajātaśatru likens his own teaching about the *prāṇas* to other discourses that gets one out of the cosmic food chain.

Here Pravāhaṇa's teaching is informed by earlier Vedic ideas about *soma* and food. In the sacrificial literature, *soma* is described as the food of the gods and is a symbol for immortality. As Brian Smith has discussed, food is an important metaphor in ancient Indian sacrificial literature.<sup>97</sup> The social hierarchy is often presented as a cosmic food chain where the higher classes are the eaters and the lower classes are the food. In most cases, the brahmins presented themselves as top of the social order, but an 'eater of food' was also an important epithet for a king. Many sacrifices promise that the *yajamāna* can become an eater of food.

In contrast, Pravāhaṇa's teaching rejects the eater of food theory of the ritualists in favour of a discourse that leads to escaping the food chain altogether: the only way to escape the process of regeneration is to escape becoming the food of the gods. Although, as an eater of food, one could have power on earth, one remained within the cycle of the eaters and the eaten. And, as long as one remained within the food chain, one was destined to return as food. According to Pravāhaṇa, only if a person can achieve a state beyond food, can that person avoid perpetual rebirth, and ultimately the world of *brahman*. The TU also criticises the food theory: 'From food, surely, are they born; all creatures that live on earth. On food alone, once born, they live; and into food in the end they pass'.<sup>98</sup> The TU teaches that *ātman* is different from food: 'Different from and lying within this man formed from the essence of food is the self (*ātman*) consisting of lifebreath'.<sup>99</sup> In this way, *ātman* is presented as a way out of the cosmic food cycle. Importantly, many of the teachings about *ātman* relate to this conception of regeneration. To know the *ātman* is to guard against repeated death and to become immortal.

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<sup>97</sup> Smith 1990.

<sup>98</sup> TU 2.2.

<sup>99</sup> TU 2.2.

Pravāhaṇa further contrasts his own teaching with discourses explicitly connected to Vedic ritualism by outlining who has access to this path to immortality. According to Pravāhaṇa, those who know his teaching follow the path of the gods and avert repeated death, but those who practise sacrifice, give gifts and perform austerities return again, following the path of the fathers. Once again, those who specialise in Upaniṣadic discourse are presented as superior to brahmin ritualists.

Importantly, it is not just Pravāhaṇa's teaching that links this knowledge to kings. All the Upaniṣadic kings that we have looked at discuss the processes of life and how to avoid repeated death. In the ŚB, Janaka delivers a teaching to Yājñavalkya that is similar to the five fires. Janaka says that the two libations that are offered as the *agnihotra* rise upwards, where they enter the air; from the air they enter the sky; from the sky they return to the earth; from the earth they enter man; and from man they enter a woman. When a man who knows this approaches his mate, he produces a son. Janaka equates the son with the *agnihotra* and says that there is nothing higher than this. Here we see how this knowledge leads to immortality through producing a male child.

Additionally, King Citra Gaṅgānani has a similar teaching. As we have seen, Citra appears in place of Pravāhaṇa in the KsU version of the king's dialogue with Śvetaketu and Uddālaka Āruṇi.<sup>100</sup> In this account, there is no analogy of the five fires, yet a similar process is described: 'When people depart from this world, it is to the moon that they all go. By means of their lifebreaths the moon swells up in the fortnight of waxing, and through the fortnight of waning it propels them to new birth.

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<sup>100</sup> The fact that there is a different name for the king in the KsU, most likely represent attempts by the composers of that text to put their own king or a king of their local tradition in an already well-known story.

Now, the moon is the door to the heavenly world'.<sup>101</sup> Here, the feasting of gods is not mentioned, but rather the moon is described as the door to heaven. As the king explains, the only way past the moon to heaven is to answer the moon's questions: 'It allows those who answer its questions to pass. As to those who do not answer its question, after they have become rain, it rains down here on earth ...'<sup>102</sup> The king continues his instruction by explaining exactly what questions the moon will ask and how to answer them. Thus, in Citra's teaching the connection between the king's knowledge and his ability to achieve immortality is quite explicit.

In these examples, we see how the Upaniṣads present teachings about the processes of life and death as a political discourse. Upaniṣadic teachings claim to offer the king powers both in this life, by winning territory and defeating his enemies, as well as in the world beyond, by becoming immortal. In this light, when we return to the question of why brahmin authors would want to present *kṣatriyas* as the source of their teachings, it seems clear that by placing *kṣatriyas* as central figures in stories about the transmission of Upaniṣadic knowledge, brahmin composers could portray this knowledge as indispensable to the king's political power. As we have seen, the dialogues emphasise that whoever is the teacher, the brahmins get paid and are treated respectfully. Thus, brahmin composers had nothing to lose, and a lot to gain, in portraying *kṣatriyas* as the authors of their own teachings.

#### **L. Conclusion:**

In this chapter we have looked at dialogues between brahmins and kings. Not only do a number of these episodes feature kings teaching brahmins, but king Pravāhaṇa actually claims that his knowledge originated among the *kṣatriyas* and had never

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<sup>101</sup> KsU 1.2.

<sup>102</sup> KsU 1.2.

reached the brahmins before. Rather than assume that this is a literal claim, in this chapter we have considered why brahmin composers would represent their own ideas as being authored by *kṣatriyas*. As we have seen, the literary trope of the *kṣatriya* who teaches the brahmin is one of a number of narrative features in the early Upaniṣads that makes these stories directly appealing to a *kṣatriya* audience.

Throughout these dialogues the ideal king is both knowledgeable in Upaniṣadic discourse and generous to brahmins. Interestingly, the knowledgeable king in no way establishes independence from brahmins. In fact, the very kings who are depicted as the most knowledgeable, Janaka and Aśvapati for example, are also represented as being the most generous. As we have seen, kings provide both wealth and accommodation even when they are the ones giving the teaching. In these cases, the brahmins are paid for their presence in the court, suggesting that even if a king was knowledgeable he still needed the brahmin to authenticate his wisdom.

The two brahmins who feature most in these interactions are Yājñavalkya and Uddālaka Āruṇi. Although Yājñavalkya is aggressive in his encounters with other brahmins, he is friendly and personable with King Janaka. In fact, he initially wins patronage from Janaka through losing his debate with the king. Similarly, Uddālaka Āruṇi is defeated in debates by kings on several occasions, with one of his most distinctive character traits being that he always admits when he does not know something. Importantly, however, far from being ridiculed for his ignorance, Uddālaka is characterised as humble and respectful, and losing discussions with kings is exactly what wins him their respect and patronage.

Additionally, Uddālaka's interaction with the king is presented in contradistinction to that of his son, whose rudeness not only indicates that he is not fully learned, but also is what prohibits him from hearing the king's teaching. In this

example, the dialogue between king and priest continues a theme that is also apparent in the dialogues between teachers and students: etiquette is a fundamental part of the teachings. In the case of Śvetaketu, he is not considered completely learned because he has not learned the social practices that accompany his discursive knowledge. This dialogue shows that these stories about relations between kings and priests serve to reinforce to both a priestly and kingly audience how to treat each other. Whereas kings need brahmins to authenticate their position as kings, brahmins need kings as their employers.

In previous chapters we have discussed the different political agendas of the BU and CU. Whereas the CU tends to be traditional and closely linked with the Kuru-Pañcāla heartland, the BU is more critical of Vedic orthodoxy and aligns itself with King Janaka of Videha. These opposing political agendas are also manifest in the dialogues between brahmins and kings, as the texts take different positions regarding whether kings should officially initiate brahmins as their student: while the BU shows kings formally initiating brahmins, the CU does not. These conflicting views, however, are consistent with other differences between the texts. As we have seen, the CU emphasises the *upanayana* much more than the BU and thus is reluctant to depict kings in the formal role of the teacher. The BU, however, concentrates more attention on the *brahmodya* and the relationship between the king and the court priest. With this different social orientation, as well as the text's more critical stance against the Kuru-Pañcāla establishment, the BU has no problems showing brahmins officially become the students of kings.

Despite these differences, both texts, along with the KsU, consistently employ metaphors of kingship to frame fundamental Upaniṣadic teachings. Knowledge of discourses about *ātman* and *prāṇa* are said to lead to kingly aspirations like supremacy



(*śraiṣṭhya*), sovereignty (*svārājya*) and lordship (*ādhipatya*); *ātman*, which is considered the centre of the ontological sphere, is directly compared to the king to reinforce his position at the centre of the political sphere; and the relationship between the *prāṇa* and the other vital powers is compared to the power struggles between the king and his ministers. Taken together, these examples serve to characterise Upaniṣadic teachings as indispensable to kings for both military and political success. In this way, political metaphors, as well as narrative frames, are used to reinforce to kings the importance of both Upaniṣadic teachings, as well as the brahmins who teach them.

As this thesis has demonstrated thus far, the Upaniṣadic dialogues firmly root the teachings in the affairs of everyday life and specifically address social situations that were fundamental in defining the life of a brahmin. In this chapter we have looked at the dynamics between priests and kings and have seen how brahmins use their expertise in knowledge to secure patronage. In the following chapter we will look at dialogues between brahmins and women and how they relate to other aspects of a brahmins life, like setting up a household and having male children.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Brahmins and women: Subjectivity and gender construction in the Upaniṣads

#### A. Introduction:

In the previous chapters we have looked at dialogues where brahmins teach students, debate with other brahmins and discuss philosophy with kings. In these situations, we have seen that the participants in the dialogues and how they interact with each other are essential aspects of Upaniṣadic discourse. Accordingly, the Upaniṣads do not merely articulate philosophical claims, but they also address how ideas are generated and circulated in the social world. In this chapter we will examine gender issues in the Upaniṣads, with particular attention to the dialogues that feature brahmins and women. It is not the aim of this chapter to impose any particular theory of gender onto the Upaniṣads, but rather to look at how issues of gender impact the teachings put forth by the texts. This chapter will demonstrate that gender is an essential aspect of philosophy in the Upaniṣads both because of the explicitly male soteriology represented by a number of the teachings, as well as because the genders of the literary characters have an impact on what they say and how they interact with each other.

First we will examine the gendered implications of the Upaniṣadic notions of self, especially as represented through metaphors, creation myths and procreation rituals. Although on some occasions the Upaniṣads make appeals to a universal knowledge available to everyone, a number of teachings present an explicitly male construction of *ātman* and offer a soteriology that links a man's ability to achieve immortality to securing male children. Importantly, the gendered implications of Upaniṣadic ideas remain ambiguous and unresolved, but nevertheless teachings about *ātman* are targeted at a predominantly male audience and achieving selfhood is

associated with a number of practices and social situations that are primarily the domain of men and that restrict the participating of women.

As we will see, the gendered dimensions of Upaniṣadic teachings have important implications concerning the construction of brahmin male subjectivity. Throughout the Upaniṣads the ideal brahmin man is the married householder, with most teachings reinforcing this construction by linking immortality to having male children, and by claiming that knowledge of Upaniṣadic discourse guarantees the production of male children. Yājñavalkya, however, challenges this ideal both by including women in his philosophical discussions, as well as by teaching that immortality can be attained without having children. In this respect we will look at Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya as competing ideals of the brahmin man.

Whereas the Upaniṣads are primarily about brahmin men, the dialogues also feature a number of female characters. In fact, because of the importance of procreation in securing immortality, presentations of female speakers in the dialogues, as well as practices assigned to women during procreation, are central to the philosophical claims of the texts. Accordingly, the representations of women, especially as wives and procreative bodies, serve to reinforce the ideal of the male brahmin householder. Nevertheless, a number of characters point to 'cracks in the veneer' of male brahmin orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> These characters embody a tension regarding women throughout the Upaniṣads: whereas women are central because of their procreative role, they are defined and depicted as subordinate to men, and their participation in Upaniṣadic discourse tends to be marginalised and mediated. In the latter part of this chapter, we will look at women who speak in Upaniṣadic dialogues,

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Findly (1985), whose work on Gārgī we will discuss later in this chapter.

how they speak, and how they negotiate with the limitations restricting women in Upaniṣadic practice.

We will focus our attention on Gārgī, Jabālā and Maitreyī. Gārgī not only speaks in the *brahmodya* at Janaka's court, but also overtly challenges Yājñavalkya's authority.<sup>2</sup> In the process, Gārgī displays her superiority in knowledge over a number of brahmin men from Kuru-Pañcāla. Jabālā teaches her son the importance of truth (*satya*), which eventually gives him entry into the brahmin community.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, her teaching is similar to a number of instances where the authority of a woman's words is only recognised when it is restated by a brahmin man. In Yājñavalkya's dialogue with his wife Maitreyī, we see a brahmin wife who discusses philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite his apparent preference for Maitreyī's knowledge, Kātyāyanī, Yājñavalkya's other wife, has a knowledge that is equally representative of what Upaniṣadic women should know. Throughout these dialogues we will see that the representation of female characters is neither static nor consistent. As wives, mothers and philosophers, female characters are not reduced to one uniform image or a single social role. However, although the representations of women are complex and contradictory, Upaniṣadic discourse largely restricts the authority of female speakers. Women do speak, but their speech is not assigned the same status as the discourses spoken by men. As Jantzen has observed: 'The problem is not that women do not and cannot have language, but that men ... refuse to listen'.<sup>5</sup> In the Upaniṣads, although the presence of women is necessary, the voices of female speakers are continually restricted and muted. In this way, the various representations of women in the

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<sup>2</sup> BU 3.6.1 & 3.8.1-12.

<sup>3</sup> CU 4.4.1-5.

<sup>4</sup> BU 2.4.1-14 & 4.5.1-15.

<sup>5</sup> Jantzen 1998: 51.

Upaniṣads primarily serve to reinforce the ideal brahmin man: the married householder.

### **B. Gendering the self: *Ātman* and the male body**

As discussed in the Introduction, the most important philosophical questions throughout the early Upaniṣads revolve around *ātman*: What is the self? How do the breaths function in keeping the body alive? What happens to the self at the time of death? As we explored earlier, many of the discourses where *ātman* figures prominently are teachings that describe the world in a naturalistic way. As opposed to the ritual symbolism of the Brāhmaṇas, many Upaniṣadic discourses conceptualise *ātman* as an important part of a life process in the natural world. For example, when Uddālaka Āruṇi describes *ātman* in terms of bees making honey, rivers flowing into oceans and salt dissolving into water, he does not link *ātman* directly to virility or semen, but suggests that *ātman* is a life force that transcends genders, not to mention different orders of species.<sup>6</sup> Despite the universalist implications of this teaching, however, on other occasions the definition of the self and who has access to knowledge about the self is more restrictive. Indeed, the word *ātman* is masculine in gender and is often specifically connected to men. In the following two sections we will look at some of the gendered implications of teachings about *ātman*, especially those that appear in creation myths and procreation rituals. On the one hand these teachings clearly privilege men and put forth a soteriology that is explicitly male, sometimes revealing an anxiety towards women and a fear that they should not know too much. On the other hand, these teachings recognise the complementarity of male and female in the process of creation and reproduction.

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<sup>6</sup> CU 6.1.1-6.16.3.

One of the most obvious ways that teachings about the self are connected to issues of gender is through the male teachers who articulate these teachings. Thus, the fact that the literary characters who discuss *ātman* are predominantly male brahmins indicates that this is the group of people most associated with these teachings. Yet, not only are the teachings about *ātman* conveyed by male speakers, but there is an assumed male audience illustrated by a number of androcentric metaphors that frame the discourses. For example, when Yājñavalkya is teaching Janaka, he describes knowing *ātman* as an embrace (*sampariṣvaktā*) comparable to embracing a female lover, which leaves a man oblivious.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the CU a successful ritual performance produces a vision of a woman.<sup>8</sup> Although these teachings do not prohibit women from gaining access to this knowledge, it is clearly aimed at a male audience. Additionally, the references to male sexual pleasure not only serve to make this knowledge appealing to a male audience, but also specifically relate knowledge about the self to sex, a connection that we will explore further in the following section.

Another aspect of the Upaniṣadic conception of self that privileges a male audience is the mythological connection between *ātman* and the primordial male creator gods, Puruṣa and Prajāpati. As we have seen in the Introduction, the AU has a creation myth where *ātman* assumes the character of the cosmic bodies of Puruṣa and Prajāpati.<sup>9</sup> Like these other creator gods, *ātman* creates the universe by sacrificing, dismembering and reconstruction his body. In a similar myth from the BU, the gendered dimensions of *ātman* are highlighted by depicting the self as the primordial man who creates the first woman from his own body.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of creation *ātman* is alone, afraid and not finding pleasure; he thus creates a wife (*patnī*) to have a

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<sup>7</sup> BU 4.3.21.

<sup>8</sup> CU 5.2.9.

<sup>9</sup> AU 1.1.

<sup>10</sup> BU 1.4.1

companion. The narrative explains that because he splits himself, he gives rise to husband (*patī*) and wife. Significantly, the female body is explicitly created from *ātman*'s body, implying that the existence of the female body is ultimately derived from the primordial male body.<sup>11</sup> The first thing that *ātman* does with his wife after creating her is to copulate with her, with the result of their union that human beings are born.<sup>12</sup> In this myth, *ātman* is linked to a particular construction of gender relations which prioritises male over female and defines women as created by, from and for men.

Despite the privileging of the male procreative role, however, procreation is represented as a process that is inherently interactive. After their initial copulation, *ātman*'s wife thinks to herself: 'After begetting me from his own body, how could he copulate with me? I know - I will hide myself'.<sup>13</sup> The story then relates how she hides in the form of a cow, but then he becomes a bull and copulates with her. From this union cattle are born. She then takes the form of various other animals, and in every case *ātman* assumes the male form of each animal and copulates with her. From these unions all the animals are born.

Significantly, this account points towards later creation myths where the primordial female takes a more active role in creation. At the end of this myth, *ātman* thinks to himself: 'I alone am the creation, for I created all this'.<sup>14</sup> However, in each case the specific animals which are born, are born because the wife has initially assumed the identity of each animal. Thus, the first instance of every species occurs

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<sup>11</sup> Another example appears in the JB (1.45-6) where *agni vaiśvānara* is compared to both the male and female body. The male is defined in terms of the five sense capacities, while the female is defined in terms of the sexual organs.

<sup>12</sup> BU 1.4.3.

<sup>13</sup> BU 1.4.4. This is similar to the Purāṇic creation myth of Puruṣa and Prakṛti where Prakṛti is the active and dynamic force in creation. In this passage, as well as the Purāṇic myth, it is woman who puts creation in motion.

<sup>14</sup> BU 1.4.5.

only when the wife assumes a new form for the sake of hiding. Despite the fact that *ātman* takes credit for creation, the narrative shows us that living beings did not come into existence from *ātman* alone, but by means of *patnī*'s activity. Like in the Prajāpati myth, this Upaniṣadic narrative defines creation in such a way that plays down the procreative agency of the woman, yet nevertheless shows the inherent complementarity among male and female in the process of creation.

Despite this active female participation, these creation myths tend to reduce the images of the female body to that of a sexual body. In a similar myth from the BU, Prajāpati creates the first woman, whose body is then compared to a *soma* sacrifice: 'Her vulva is the sacrificial ground, her pubic hair is the sacred grass, her labia majora are the Soma-press, and her labia minora are the fire blazing at the centre'.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen in the Puruṣasūkta and its subsequent mythology, Vedic literature often presents the human body as a paradigm to describe the universe and the sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

However, the body of Puruṣa is a specifically male body which both represents the entire universe and generates the social categories (*varṇa*), the moon and the sun, Indra and Agni. The presentation of this myth in the BU illustrates how the sacrificial imagery is grafted differently onto the male body than the female body. The myth begins with Prajāpati whose body throughout Vedic literature is described and linked to both the universe and the sacrifice. However, this particular telling of the myth concludes by comparing a woman's body to a *soma* sacrifice, where only the sexual and generative organs from the woman are mentioned. Whereas a man's body is a microcosm for the entire universe, the female body is reduced to a sexual, procreative body.

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<sup>15</sup> BU 6.4.3.

<sup>16</sup> RV 10.90



Admittedly, a man's body is not always likened to the entire universe. In Prāvāhaṇa's instruction to Uddālaka Āruṇi, he compares the five fires to five aspects of the world: 1) the upper regions (*asau loka*) 2) rain clouds (*parjanya*) 3) earth (*ayam loka*) 4) man (*puruṣa*) 5) woman (*yoṣa*). In the discussion of man, his body is described in terms of the vital functions: 1) open mouth (*vyāttam*) 2) breath (*prāṇa*) 3) speech (*vāc*) 4) sight (*cakṣu*) 5) hearing (*śrota*). The description of a woman, however, appears exclusively in terms of her sexual organs and how a man approaches her during sex: 1) vulva (*upastha*) 2) coming close (*lomāṇi*) 3) vagina (*yoni*) 4) penetration (*antaḥ karoti*) 5) climax (*abhinandā*). These examples illustrate that while the male body is linked to sacrificial and cosmological imagery in a number of ways, the female body tends to be described particularly in relation to sexual intercourse and procreation.

As we will see, much of Upaniṣadic discourse encourages brahmin men to engage in sexual activity in pursuit of their soteriological goals. Accordingly, it is not surprising that in some passages the male body is also described as a procreative body. Nevertheless, the male body is never reduced to its procreative role. For example, in the CU description of the *vāmadevya sāman*, explicitly male sexual actions are linked to different aspects of the chant:

When he lies down with the woman, it is the High Chant. When he lies upon (*prati*) the woman, it is the Response (*prati.hāra*). When he ejaculates, it is the Concluding Chant. When he withdraws, it is the Concluding Chant. This is the Vāmadevya Sāman woven upon sexual intercourse.<sup>17</sup>

The discourse goes on to say that one who knows this becomes proficient in sex and this leads to a full life-span and having lots of children and livestock.<sup>18</sup> Here, the male body is also described as a sexual body, but unlike the female body that is objectified

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<sup>17</sup> CU 2.13.1.

<sup>18</sup> CU 2.13.

as a sexual body, the brahmin man is characterised as a sexual subject and the male body is never reduced to the sexual organs. Rather, men should have sex for the sake of actualising their pursuits of knowledge, as sex is considered an activity that is part of the quest for immortality.

These examples not only show that the Upaniṣads tend to represent the female body differently from the male body, but by linking *ātman* with the mythology of Puruṣa and Prajāpati, these passages present a particularly male conception of the self. In this way, *ātman* is not a universal self in the sense that everyone has an *ātman*, but rather *ātman* is a particular construction of the self which is both explicitly male and gained through particular kinds of practices which are primarily the domain of men. Importantly, despite the explicitly male connotations of some teachings, in other contexts *ātman* is described as operating the same way in plants and animals as with people. In these cases, implicitly the female body has an *ātman* the same way that a male body has one, thus opening up a discursive space for woman like Gārgī and Maitreyī to be knowledgeable in Upaniṣadic teachings. Significantly, these ambiguities concerning the gendered implications of *ātman* remain unresolved.

Nevertheless, the descriptions of a specifically male creator of the universe are closely connected to a number of rituals in the BU which emphasise the male role in precreation and birth.<sup>19</sup> As we have seen in the *upanayana*, the relationship between teacher and student is often described in birth metaphors and the initiation itself was considered a man's second birth and bestowed upon him the status of twiceborn (*dvija*). In this way, a man's birth into society, which was defined and controlled by

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, defining and controlling the process of birth within a male dominated discourse is characteristic of a number of religious and mythological traditions. There are many religious myths that attribute the act of giving birth to men. For example, in Greek mythology Athena is born from the head of Zeus. In the Torah, Eve is created from Adam's body. For other examples and a further discussion see Jantzen (1998: 141-3).

brahmin men, was considered more real than his natural birth. As Roy has pointed out with regards to the Vedic sacrifice, ritual actions often function in taking away the agency of women from the process of procreation: 'The systematic reiteration of a definition of cosmogonic activities... implied that goddesses were marginal or even irrelevant to the process. Further, the possibility of recreating such acts was open only to the male sacrificer. In effect this meant that the procreative power of women was simultaneously denied and appropriated'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the BU prescribes *mantras* for a man to say both for inducing and preventing pregnancy.<sup>21</sup> Here, a woman's body is defined primarily as a receptacle for a man's semen and it is the semen which is regarded as containing the power to generate life.

These rituals that deal with procreation not only promise men the ability to control conception, but they also bestow the power to generate offspring with specifically desired characteristics.<sup>22</sup> One set of instructions mentions a mixture with rice and milk that a man should eat if he wants a son with a ruddy complexion.<sup>23</sup> This is a mixture that should be prepared by his wife for him and his wife to eat together. There are four sets of characteristics that are then described for potential offspring and a mixture that should be made and eaten for each one. The first desired offspring is a son with a ruddy complexion and tawny eyes, who will master two Vedas. The second is a son with a dark complexion and reddish eyes who will master three Vedas. Surprisingly, the third offspring mentioned is a daughter, who is described as learned (*paṇḍitā*). Although these instructions for how to secure a female child at first seem inconsistent with the male bias of this section, in fact learned women are necessary for

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<sup>20</sup> Roy 1991-2: 13.

<sup>21</sup> BU 6.4.10-11.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the CU Kauṣītaki teaches that one can manipulate how many children one has according to how one venerates *ātman* (1.5.2).

<sup>23</sup> BU 6.4.15-18.

these rituals to work. All the procreation rituals described in this section, although promising to give reproductive power to men, must be performed by a husband and wife together. Accordingly, female participation in the process of procreation is not restricted entirely to the role of sexual partner, but rather, as these rituals illustrate, women are also ritual partners for their husbands.

The essential role of the brahmin's wife in these procreation rituals again points to the complimentary depiction of the processes of creation and procreation. Yet, despite the acknowledgement that both male and female participation is needed to produce offspring, these rituals attempt to give brahmin men the ultimate control over procreative activities. This also extends to attempting to define and control the process of birth. Like the ceremony where a man bestows his knowledge to his son before he departs from the world, a man comes physically close to his newborn son and says in his right ear three times: 'speech, speech' (*vāc*). He then feeds the baby a mixture of curd, honey and *ghee* and says: 'The earth I place in you! The intermediate region I place in you! The sky I place in you! Earth, intermediate region, sky - the Whole I place in you'.<sup>24</sup> It is significant that this *mantra* immediately precedes the father handing over his son to the mother for the child's first breast-feeding. Roy has pointed out that this is another case where Upaniṣadic discourse privileges the man's role in the procreation process: 'The offspring obtained, moreover, were connected with the father through rituals. For instance, the son was first fed by the father and then handed over for breast-feeding to the mother. This probably symbolically incorporated the newborn son within the patrilineage and asserted the father's role in childbirth'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> BU 6.4.25.

<sup>25</sup> Roy 1994: 257.

After the first feeding the man gives his son a name while saying: 'You are the Veda'.<sup>26</sup> This is significant because through this ritual the boy is born into language. As we have seen in the Brāhmaṇas, what makes something real is not its mere physical existence, but its ontological significance which is manufactured during the ritual, indicating that a significant aspect of creating reality is through language, by giving an object a name.<sup>27</sup> In Vedic culture, a person only could enter into the community when he or she had been properly named through the ritual. In the BU, while there are clear instructions of how to name a male child, there are no descriptions of naming a female child. Although the text does not state that a similar naming ceremony could not take place for a daughter, its neglect is indicative of the male bias of the texts. Women are not systematically denied a place in the discourse, but rather their possibilities for selfhood are not explicitly addressed. The Upaniṣads are primarily about brahmin men and only tend to address women *vis-à-vis* their relation to men.

Finally, after naming the boy, the man addresses his wife: 'A man who is born the son of a brahmin with this knowledge has surely reached the pinnacle of prosperity in fame, the pinnacle of eminence in sacred knowledge'.<sup>28</sup> Here, at the end of this section these instructions reinforce the father's role in the process of procreation and indicate that the father's knowledge ensures prosperity for his son.

### **C. The self, virility and immortality:**

As we have seen in the Introduction, immortality in the Upaniṣads is often defined in terms of prolonging one's lifespan. In these contexts, knowledge about how the body works is important because it implies that one can manipulate the process of life in

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<sup>26</sup> BU 6.4.26.

<sup>27</sup> 'Reality, according to the Vedic savants, is not given but made... the ritual was the workshop in which all reality was forged' (Smith 1989: 50).

<sup>28</sup> BU 6.4.28.

order to avert death. The CU, for example, tells us that Mahidāsa Aitareya lived to be one hundred and sixteen after claiming that he would overcome death because of his knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Different from, yet related to, this understanding of immortality is a soteriology that teaches that a man can pass his *ātman* to his son. In this way, a man can achieve immortality by means of having a male child, as well as by passing knowledge onto him. As we will see, this soteriology explicitly addresses the interests of brahmin men and has important implications both concerning the gendered status of *ātman*, as well as possible restrictions on who can achieve immortality.

The Brāhmaṇas are explicit that because a father achieves immortality through his son, only a married man can perform a sacrifice. Olivelle describes this connection between immortality and having a male child: 'The Brahmanical conception of immortality as freedom from physical death and of the family as the true and complete person are reflected in the belief that a man's immortality is found in his son'.<sup>30</sup> For example, the AB explains that when a woman has a son, she not only gives birth to a child, but the husband himself is born again in her as the son: 'The husband enters the wife; Becoming an embryo he enters the mother. He is born in the tenth month. A wife is called wife, because in her he is born again'.<sup>31</sup> The ŚB reinforces this identification of father and son: 'The father is the same as the son, and the son is the same as the father'.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in the Upaniṣads there are several discourses that explain how the father passes on his vital functions to his son. In the BU there is a passage that explains that when a man is about to die he should teach his son all his Vedic learning. This passage claims that when a man who knows this dies 'he enters his son with these

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<sup>29</sup> BU 3.16.7.

<sup>30</sup> Olivelle 1992: 27.

<sup>31</sup> AB 7.13 (translated in Olivelle 1992: 26).

<sup>32</sup> ŚB 12.4.3.1.

very vital functions (*prāṇa*). And if there is anything he may have done wrong, his son delivers him from all that ... So it is only through a son that a man finds a secure footing'.<sup>33</sup> Here, the father not only continues living through his son, but also through his son he absolves himself from any wrongdoing. The KsU describes a father-son ceremony where again the father passes his *prāṇa* on to his son.<sup>34</sup> This rite instructs that a man should lie down and cover himself with a garment. Then 'the son comes and lies on top of him, touching the various organs of the father with his own corresponding organs'.<sup>35</sup> This rite, which explains that every aspect of the father's body is passed onto his son, bestows the father's authority onto his son. This and other passages indicate the importance of passing on one's knowledge before death, emphasising that it is not enough merely to have sons, but one must also transmit knowledge to a son. This also further casts teachings about *ātman* as a replacement of ritual action. In the sacrificial texts a man had sons so that they could perform ritual actions after a man's death. Here, the suggestion is that the father actually becomes alive in the son by means of passing on knowledge about the self.

As having a son leads to immortality, virility and sexual potency are fundamental aspects of male subjectivity. Accordingly, many of the discourses in the Upaniṣads are either explicitly about sex or are embedded within sexual metaphors. The CU, for example, describes *om* as uniting in sexual union, and knowledge of the *udgītha* chant is equated with satisfying and fulfilling sexual desires.<sup>36</sup> More specifically to male sexuality, the discourses about procreation at the end of the BU link Upaniṣadic knowledge to a man's virility. The narrative warns that brahmins who do not know this myth will not attain immortality. This point is further emphasised by

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<sup>33</sup> BU 1.5.17.

<sup>34</sup> KsU 2.14.

<sup>35</sup> KsU 2.14.

<sup>36</sup> CU 1.1.6.

connecting this knowledge to the eminent teacher Uddālaka Āruṇi: ‘Surely it was this knowledge that made Uddālaka Āruṇi exclaim ... “Many are the mortals of Brahmin descent who, engaging in sexual intercourse without this knowledge, depart this world drained of virility (*vīrya*) and deprived of merit (*sukṛta*)”’.<sup>37</sup> This reference to Uddālaka Āruṇi connects this point to the teaching of the five fires, which he had just learned from Pravāhaṇa in the previous section. As the five fires discourse explains how semen is linked to immortality, Uddālaka Āruṇi reflects that brahmins were losing their virility without this knowledge. Uddālaka teaches that those who have the knowledge to maintain their virility and merit during sex become immortal, but those who do not have this knowledge depart from this world drained of their virility.

The importance of maintaining one’s virility is further emphasised as the BU explains what to do when a man discharges semen when he is not having sexual intercourse: ‘One should touch it and also address it with this formula, “I retrieve this semen that fell on earth today; into water or plants though it may have seeped; May I regain my virility, my ardour, my passion; let the fire and the fire-mounds each return to its place”’.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in his teaching of the five fires, Pravāhaṇa teaches that semen is the essence of a man’s life.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, as semen is regarded as a life force, there is a fear that losing semen will result in losing virility. The BU tells us that if a man recites this formula and then rubs the semen between his breast and brow, he will retain his vigour (*tejas*), virility (*indriya*), fame (*yaśa*), wealth (*draviṇa*) and merit (*sukṛta*). In these examples, Upaniṣadic discourses are explicitly connected to a particular construction of a man, which defines masculinity in terms of sexual potency, thereby linking Upaniṣadic knowledge to virility and sexual power. This passage

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<sup>37</sup> BU 6.4.4.

<sup>38</sup> BU 6.4.5.

<sup>39</sup> BU 6.4.1.



shows that male sexual activity needs to be controlled for the sake of procreation. As semen is directly linked to immortality, there is a fear of spilling one's seed outside the discursively sanctioned activity of heterosexual intercourse.

Furthermore, this section of the BU suggests that even heterosexual intercourse with one's wife could be potentially dangerous without the proper knowledge, as virility could be won and lost during sex. One passage explains that a man can appropriate merit (*sukṛta*) from a woman during their sexual activity. However, the narrative warns: 'The women, on the other hand, appropriate to themselves the merits of a man who engages in sexual intercourse with them without this knowledge'.<sup>40</sup>

This tension regarding the female participation in procreation continues further on in this section where there is a ritual for men to make women have sex with them. This ritual explains that a man should approach a woman who has finished menstruating and invite her to have sex with him.<sup>41</sup> If she does not consent to having sex with him, he should bribe her and if she continues to refuse he should beat her with a stick or with his fists and overpower her. Roebuck sees this passage as an 'apparent encouragement of domestic violence', yet points out that it is unclear 'whether actual or symbolic violence is intended'.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, this violence is significant, especially when we remember that the *brahmodya* is framed within metaphors of combat. Thus, despite the fact that this passage is embedded within ritual and perhaps should be taken metaphorically, the violent and aggressive portrayal of the brahmin man is consistent with the depiction of the confrontational masculinity of verbal debates.

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<sup>40</sup> BU 6.4.3.

<sup>41</sup> BU 6.4.6-8.

<sup>42</sup> Roebuck (2001: 119/121 n.).

As the passage continues, it explains that if a woman resists the man's sexual advances and has to be overtaken by force, the man can say a *mantra* which takes away her splendour (*yaśa*).<sup>43</sup> However, if she agrees to have sex with him, he can say a *mantra* which ensures that both of them can become full of splendour through sexual intercourse. This passage not only emphasises the importance of Upaniṣadic discourse during sexual intercourse, but also shows a brahmin male anxiety towards women. Women, even the characteristically passive and supportive wife, are always a potential danger because they can appropriate merit (*sukṛta*) and splendour (*yaśa*) during sex.

Upaniṣadic teachings are not only linked to making a woman have sex with a man, but also a man's knowledge can make her desire him. As he has intercourse with her he should say: 'From my body you spring, from every inch. Born from my heart, you are my body's pith. Make her crazy about me, as if she's been hit with a dart carrying a poison tip'.<sup>44</sup> This passage, a reference to a creation myth where the first woman emerges from the primordial male body, is invoked to explain that because women derive their existence from men, a man has the ability to manipulate her emotional attitude towards him.

Importantly, the competitive and aggressive aspect of sexual relations is not only directed against brahmin's sexual partners, but also their sexual rivals. Guarding one's wife is considered another aspect of securing immortality. The JB, for example, claims that a wife must be protected so that another man's immortality does not grow in her: 'Lest in my womb, in my world somebody else come into existence'.<sup>45</sup> In this way, a man's knowledge of discourses relating to sexual practices not only gives him power over women, but can also give him power over other men. Similarly, the BU

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<sup>43</sup> BU 6.4.7. Similarly, the CU states that one who knows the *vāmadevya sāmān* as woven upon sexual intercourse should not hold back from any woman (CU 2.13.2).

<sup>44</sup> BU 6.4.9.

<sup>45</sup> JB 1.17 (translation in Olivelle 1992).

prescribes a ritual where a man can make a mixture and perform a *mantra* if his wife has a lover whom he hates, pointing out that a man who is cursed by a brahmin with this knowledge will depart from this world without his virility and merit.<sup>46</sup> Men might think twice before seducing the wife of a brahmin for fear that their virility could be taken away: 'A man cursed by a Brahmin possessing this knowledge is sure to depart from this world bereft of his virility and stripped of his good works'.<sup>47</sup> These examples illustrate that a crucial aspect of brahmin subjectivity is knowledge about sex and procreation. This knowledge not only promises the reward of immortality, but also bestows power in this world over women and other men.

Additionally, these rituals and teachings outlining sexual relations are closely connected to a soteriology that is explicitly addressed to the interests of brahmin men. This does not necessary imply that women could not be candidates for immortality, but rather the ideal candidate is undoubtedly the brahmin householder. In the following sections we will see that the teachings and story of Yājñavalkya challenge this ideal, but most brahmins, like Satyakāma, are depicted as married householders.

#### **D. Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma: Competing ideals of male subjectivity**

As we have discussed in previous chapters, Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma embody opposing constructions of the Upaniṣadic brahmin, particularly in relation to teaching and debating. In this section we will explore how their competing ideals for brahminhood are developed through their interactions with female characters. Whereas Satyakāma is the embodiment of the married householder, Yājñavalkya challenges

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<sup>46</sup> BU 6.4.12.

<sup>47</sup> BU 6.4.12.

traditional views by including women in philosophical discussion and not having children.

As we discussed in the first chapter, Satyakāma's life story fits the ideal of the brahmin householder. Satyakāma is married with a household fire, and supports himself as a teacher by taking on students. This lifestyle complies with a number of teachings in the Upaniṣads, including instructions in the TU which prescribe that brahmins should continue their family line upon their completion of Vedic studies.<sup>48</sup> Although the presence of Satyakāma's wife is crucial to his portrayal as a householder, she remains in the shadows, as she is not mentioned by name and Satyakāma does not acknowledge her when she speaks to him. We will return to the character of Satyakāma's wife later in the chapter. For now, it is important to point out that the appearance of Satyakāma's wife is primarily to characterise Satyakāma as the type of brahmin gets married and maintains a household. As such, her personal identity is not specified and her words are not given authority.

In contrast, Yājñavalkya has an affectionate and personable exchange with his wife. In fact, Yājñavalkya's dialogue with Maitreyī is one of two separate occasions when he speaks to women about philosophy, thus setting him apart from other Upaniṣadic teachers, especially the traditional Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins. In this way, Yājñavalkya's interactions with women are an important aspect of his general character as an innovative and enigmatic figure.

In his conversation with Maitreyī, for example, he frames his teaching in a way that specifically acknowledges her relation to him as his wife.<sup>49</sup> He says: 'One holds a husband dear, you see, not out of love for the husband; rather, it is out of love for

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<sup>48</sup> TU 1.11.1.

<sup>49</sup> BU 2.4.4.

oneself (*ātman*) that one holds a husband dear. One holds a wife dear not out of love for the wife; rather, it is out of love for oneself that one holds a wife dear'.<sup>50</sup> This affectionate prelude to his teaching is important when we recall that much of the significance of Upaniṣadic dialogues is in outlining how brahmins should interact with their dialogical partners. In this case, as Yājñavalkya specifically relates his teaching to the particular relationship that exists between his wife and him, this dialogue establishes a mode of address whereby brahmin men can speak to their wives about philosophy.

Additionally, Yājñavalkya's discussion with Maitreyī is significant in light of the fact that he is the only brahmin in the Upaniṣads to teach that having male offspring is not necessary as part of achieving immortality. As we will see, when the procreative role of women is defined in terms of the soteriological goals of men, women tend to be restrained and marginalised. It is perhaps because he does not equate his own immortality with this particular construction of women that Yājñavalkya can include women in his dialogues.

Furthermore, his conversation with Maitreyī can be seen as an alternative model to how a brahmin man should pass on his knowledge before he dies. This dialogue begins with the context that Yājñavalkya is about to divide his inheritance between his two wives. As we have seen, there are a number of passages that instruct how a man who is about to die should pass on knowledge to his son. In this case, when Yājñavalkya is about to depart, he addresses his wife. That Yājñavalkya teaches Maitreyī under these specific conditions suggests that either Yājñavalkya can achieve his own immortality through passing his knowledge onto her or that Yājñavalkya is instructing Maitreyī for the sake of her immortality. In either case, Yājñavalkya puts

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<sup>50</sup> BU 2.4.5.

his own authority behind an alternative to the standard model of the transmission of knowledge.

Nevertheless, despite speaking to women and offering a soteriology that is more inclusive of women, Yājñavalkya is not a feminist. In fact, he is condescending to both Maitreyī and Gārgī. When he speaks to Maitreyī, he indicates that she might have trouble understanding him, by telling her to ‘listen carefully’.<sup>51</sup> Maitreyī’s ability to fully understand Yājñavalkya’s teaching is further called into question towards the end of the dialogue when Maitreyī says that she is ‘confused’ by what he has said. Yājñavalkya responds rather unsympathetically: ‘Look, I have not said anything confusing’.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, he is condescending when he debates with Gārgī. As we will discuss later in this chapter, Gārgī is the first person whom Yājñavalkya threatens in this debate, picking on her because she is an easy target.

However, Yājñavalkya’s condescending behaviour towards Maitreyī and Gārgī is not necessarily directed against them as women, but can be seen as part of his aggressive and confrontational debating style. Not only is Yājñavalkya aggressive and ironic with his dialogical partners, but throughout the Upaniṣads teachings are framed within explicitly *kṣatriya* metaphors.<sup>53</sup> Although much of this rhetoric is an attempt to make Upaniṣadic teachings relevant to a *kṣatriya* audience, this also reflects a particular construction of the brahmin male as aggressive, competitive and sometimes violent. As we have seen, Yājñavalkya’s success is largely attributed to his ability to bully and intimidate his opponents. It is interesting that although brahmins define themselves differently from *kṣatriyas*, that they are experts at knowledge rather than

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<sup>51</sup> BU 2.4.4 (*nididhyāsava*). Olivelle takes this more strongly as ‘try to concentrate’, while Fišer takes this as ‘do try to think attentively of it’. Radhakrishnan and Roebuck render this as ‘meditate upon this’.

<sup>52</sup> BU 2.4.13.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Smith has made similar observations: ‘Although the Veda was certainly composed by the priestly and intellectual class (i.e., the Brahmins), the ideology propounded in it is shot through with the martial values ordinarily associated with warriors (i.e., kshatriyas)’ (1990: 178).

fighting, they nevertheless equate their success in knowledge with physical violence and military strength. Similarly, the pedagogical dialogues are more combative than supportive, as teachers instruct students by means of confrontation, testing and imparting false knowledge. Throughout the Upaniṣads, aggression, competitiveness and suspicion are among the qualities that are needed to participate in the social world of brahmin men.

**E. The myth of recovering the authentic female voice:**

The status of women in ancient India and the portrayal of women in Vedic literature has been a topic of much debate. A number of the first scholars to approach this subject attempted to argue that women enjoyed a relatively favourable position in the Vedic period. A. S. Altekar, for example, argued that the position of women was higher in ancient India than in ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, R. C. Dutt claimed: 'No nation held their women in higher honour than the Hindus'.<sup>55</sup> Uma Chakravarti has argued that this trajectory of scholarship was part of the Indian Nationalist project which attempted to assign a high place for women in the ancient Hindu past:

The analysis of the position of women in ancient India has also been coloured by the fact that almost all the works have been written by scholars who would fall within the nationalist school of history. Writing at a time when Hindu social institutions were being subjected to fierce criticism by a generation that was imbibing Western education and Western values, these scholars worked hard to show that the position of women had been high in the ancient past.<sup>56</sup>

More recently, feminist scholars like Findly have attempted to characterise the quite positive portrayal of female characters like Gārgī in the Upaniṣads as representing 'an

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<sup>54</sup> Altekar 1959: 337-8.

<sup>55</sup> Dutt 1972: 168-9.

<sup>56</sup> Chakravati 1999: 74.

era of unsurpassed advantage and opportunity for women'.<sup>57</sup> However, it is impossible to assess the actual situation facing women in ancient India and we must keep in mind that the utterances of female characters like Gārgī and Maitreyī are not the direct expressions of a female authorial voice. As Jamison reminds us, we are never hearing women's voices directly: 'From the beginning we must face the fact that we are not going to hear an authentic woman's voice – or at least not without tampering by those who have inserted it into the tradition for their own reasons'.<sup>58</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at dialogues where women participate in Upaniṣadic discourse, examining how female voices are represented and how interactions between men and women are described. As we will see, these dialogues both characterise the participation of women as vital, as well as attempt to limit and control the extent of their participation. Importantly, although the speech and actions of women continue to be controlled by and mediated through men, we also see the construction of a new kinds of female subjectivity. Yet, rather than attempt to explain away these contradictions, it is important to recognise this tension in the Upaniṣadic portrayal of women, especially the female characters, as a significant aspect of the texts. As Jamison explains: 'The conceptual position of women in ancient India was by nature *not* unified, not governed by a coherent set of principles and attitudes. It was contradictory, and these contradictions, found both in overt statements and in attitudes covertly reflected in narrative and ritual, are irreconcilable'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Findly 1985: 38.

<sup>58</sup> Jamison 1996: 8.

<sup>59</sup> Jamison 1996: 203.



## F. Gārgī: The debating tactics of female philosophers

Gārgī Vācakanvī, who appears in the debate in King Janaka's court, is the woman who figures most prominently in philosophical discussions.<sup>60</sup> She, along with the brahmins from Kuru-Pañcāla, challenges Yājñavalkya and his claim to the prizes offered by Janaka. In her debate with Yājñavalkya she shows that, contrary to his accusations, she is not speaking beyond her knowledge, and in fact she displays her knowledge both through her understanding of the discourse as well as her employment of a number of debating tactics. Far from silenced by Yājñavalkya, Gārgī emerges as his strongest opponent and places herself on the winning side of the debate.

Gārgī is first singled out from the other brahmins because she is the first challenger whom Yājñavalkya threatens. In her initial confrontation with Yājñavalkya, Gārgī begins her questioning by asking about the foundation of water: 'Yājñavalkya, tell me – since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth?'<sup>61</sup> This question begins a verbal exchange in which Gārgī continues to ask about the foundation for every response that Yājñavalkya gives. Finally, when Yājñavalkya replies that Prajāpati is woven back and forth upon the worlds of *brahman*, Gārgī once again demands a further answer and asks: 'On what are the worlds of *brahman* woven back and forth?'<sup>62</sup> At this point Yājñavalkya warns her that if she continues to question him her head will shatter apart: 'You are asking

<sup>60</sup> BU 3.6.1 & 3.8.1-12.

<sup>61</sup> BU 3.6 (*atha hainam gārgī vacakanvī papraccha, yājñavalkya, iti hovāca, yad idam sarvam apsv otaṁ ca protaṁ ca, kasmīn nu khalv āpa oṭāś ca protāś ceti*). Olivelle points out that *ota* and *protā* are technical terms borrowed from weaving. They refer to the back and forth movement of the shuttle in the process of weaving. This metaphor is also used in the RV (Olivelle 1996: 406). Findly argues that Gārgī's familiarity with this metaphor illustrates that she is familiar generally with Vedic discourse (Findly: 29). S. Sharma, however, offers a different perspective. She suggests that the textile industry was run by women: 'Therefore, it was in the fitness of things that the terms "warp and woof" were employed by a female philosopher, Gārgī Vācakanvī to discuss philosophical matters' (S. Sharma 1985: 124-125).

<sup>62</sup> BU 3.6.

too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions. So, Gārgī, don't ask too many questions!'<sup>63</sup>

Here, Yājñavalkya justifies his warning to Gārgī by claiming that she is asking beyond her knowledge. In Chapter Two we looked at Insler's distinction of two types of threats about head shattering. Insler argues that Yājñavalkya's warning to Gārgī represents the first type because Gārgī asks beyond her own knowledge and that her insufficient knowledge is implicit in the narrative:

The vocabulary of the first type makes matters extremely clear, because the technical term employed, *atiprachati* 'asks further or beyond', implicitly requires the addition of *vidyām* 'knowledge' to complete the thought. That is to say, the questioner is asking about matters beyond the limits of his knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

Although it is true that Yājñavalkya accuses Gārgī of asking beyond her knowledge, there are a number of details in the narrative that suggest that Gārgī is not speaking beyond what she knows, but that Yājñavalkya is merely employing a threat as a means to silence her. Quite possibly Yājñavalkya is making a threat in response to a question that he cannot answer.

One reason to call into question Yājñavalkya's accusation is that Gārgī speaks a second time. She is the only speaker who challenges Yājñavalkya more than once and her second challenge suggests she is confident that she is safe from her head shattering apart because she does indeed know what she is talking about. Additionally, when Gārgī speaks again she appeals to an audience, which is a tactic whereby she calls attention to her interactions with Yājñavalkya. Indeed, appealing to witnesses is an important debating tactic employed by other female characters speaking in the court of a king. For example, in the Mahābhārata, both Draupadī and Śakuntalā use the assembly to bear witness to their own truthfulness, as well as to highlight their fluency

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<sup>63</sup> BU 3.6.

<sup>64</sup> Insler 1991: 99.

in philosophical discourse, especially when the authority of their speech is called into question.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, when Gārgī questions Yājñavalkya the second time, at first she does not address him directly, but rather appeals to all the other challengers: ‘Distinguished Brahmins! I am going to ask this man two questions. If he can give me the answer to them, none of you will be able to defeat him in a theological debate [*brahmodya*].’<sup>66</sup> Significantly, she pays her respects to the other brahmins by referring to them as ‘distinguished’ [*bhagavantaḥ*], yet she does not refer to Yājñavalkya by name, nor does she speak to him in a respectful way. Rather, she simply refers to Yājñavalkya with the personal pronoun ‘*imam*’. Assuming that Yājñavalkya silences Gārgī the first time, not by his display of Upaniṣadic knowledge, but by personally bullying her with threats, then it is not surprising that Gārgī is appealing to the other brahmins to be her witnesses, so that Yājñavalkya does not employ any more debating tricks.

Once she has the attention of the Kuru-Pāñcāla brahmins, Gārgī appeals to the truthfulness of her speech. Significantly, this is similar to the *satyakriyā*, which is also a technique employed by other female speakers. In his article on the *brahmodya*, Thompson defines the *satyakriyā* as a ‘formal utterance, in some ways akin to a vow, by means of which usually extraordinary or magical ends are accomplished’.<sup>67</sup> The *satyakriyā* is used by both men and women in Vedic literature. However, in the Upaniṣads and later literature the *satyakriyā* becomes a debating tactic especially employed by female characters because they do not have the same discursive authority

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<sup>65</sup> Although the MBh comes much later than the Upaniṣads, there are a number of similarities regarding the representation of female characters. This is a topic I hope to address in more detail elsewhere.

<sup>66</sup> BU 3.8.1.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson 1997: 19.

that brahmin and *kṣatriya* men enjoy.<sup>68</sup> In Gārgī's case, she has neither the educational lineage nor the patronage of Janaka to give her words the same power of persuasion as Yājñavalkya. She thus needs an audience to bear witness to her truthfulness.

Another important debating tactic that Gārgī employs is that she assumes a masculine mode of speaking.<sup>69</sup> After the brahmins encourage her to ask her questions, Gārgī then addresses Yājñavalkya directly: 'I rise to challenge you, Yājñavalkya, with two questions, much as a fierce warrior [*ugra-putraḥ*] of Kāśī or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy. Give me the answers to them'.<sup>70</sup> As we have discussed previously, by comparing herself to a warrior and positioning herself as a direct combatant to Yājñavalkya, Gārgī's challenge is aggressive and shows the competitive atmosphere and high stakes of a *brahmodya*. Even though Yājñavalkya has just accused her of ignorance and threatened that her head will shatter apart, Gārgī remains undaunted and clearly sees herself as equal to Yājñavalkya. Additionally, Gārgī's use of this trope of combat shows that only when she adopts an aggressive and confrontational approach to debate is her argument taken seriously.<sup>71</sup> Thus, she has to take on the rhetoric of a brahmin male subject to pose a serious challenge to Yājñavalkya.

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<sup>68</sup> Although Thompson does not directly relate the *satyakriyā* to women, the example that he uses to illustrate a *satyakriyā* is a dialogue between Bindumatī and King Aśoka. Thompson argues that when Bindumatī speaks with the king, she 'is essentially relying on the power of her own integrity... her own personal authority' (1997: 20).

<sup>69</sup> Gārgī merely talks like a man, but as we will see, a number of female characters actually assume a male identity. This tactic can also be seen in the RV where Ghoṣā speaks to the gods as a son rather than as a daughter (RV 10.39.6).

<sup>70</sup> BU 3.8.2.

<sup>71</sup> Importantly, the metaphors that Gārgī employs are not merely explicitly male, but more precisely they are associated with a particular kind of male: a *kṣatriya*. As we have seen, a number of brahmins invoke imagery associated with *kṣatriyas* as a way to make their interactions more combative and competitive. Additionally, as we have seen in Chapter Three, metaphors associated with *kṣatriyas* are often used to frame innovative teachings. From this perspective, perhaps Gārgī depicts herself as a *kṣatriya* in order to associate herself with the kinds of doctrines taught by Pravāhaṇa and Ajātaśatru.

Similarly, Gārgī adopts Yājñavalkya's characteristic use of humour in an attempt to unsettle Yājñavalkya himself. After her aggressive challenge, Gārgī asks Yājñavalkya her first question: 'The things above the sky, the things below the earth, and the things between the earth and the sky, as well as all those things people refer to as past, present and future – on what, Yājñavalkya, are all these things woven back and forth?'<sup>72</sup> Yājñavalkya's response is that they are all woven back and forth upon space (*ākāśa*). Gārgī responds to his answer by praising him: 'All honour to you [*namaste*], Yājñavalkya. You really cleared that up for me! Get ready for the second'.<sup>73</sup> This response is seemingly respectful, yet when Gārgī delivers her second question it becomes clear that her praise was actually mocking Yājñavalkya, as her second question is exactly the same as her first. Olivelle has remarked on the acerbity of Gārgī's second question: 'I think that Gārgī's response is dripping with sarcasm. She is not satisfied at all with the first answer and is telling Yājñavalkya, in effect, to get serious! This, I believe, is the reason why her second question is a repetition of the first'.<sup>74</sup> This is significant because even though Gārgī does not end up defeating Yājñavalkya, she openly defies his authority by mocking him in front of the assembly.

In fact, her mocking praise suggests that perhaps her first question was also posed ironically. Her question is about the foundation of the sky (*diva*), the earth (*pṛthivī*), the things between the sky and earth, the past (*bhūta*), the present (*bhava*) and the future (*bhaviṣya*). In her initial series of questions Gārgī also asked about the ultimate foundation for all things; she continued to ask on what the worlds of air, Gandharvas and the sun was woven back and forth. In this case, however, rather than ask about the sky, earth, past, present and future as separate questions, Gārgī asks

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<sup>72</sup> BU 3.8.3.

<sup>73</sup> BU 3.8.5.

<sup>74</sup> Olivelle 1996: 311 n.

about the foundation of everything at the same time, perhaps attempting to avoid Yājñavalkya's seemingly infinite regression. If her second challenge is basically a restatement of her first line of questioning, then essentially Gārgī asks the same question three times. If this is the case, then Yājñavalkya's initial refusal to answer her casts into doubt his own knowledge. Although Gārgī does not have the authority to directly threaten Yājñavalkya, when she responds to Yājñavalkya's answer with flattery only to ask him the same question again, she shows that she is still not satisfied with his answers.

Following Gārgī's second question, Yājñavalkya responds with a teaching about the imperishable (*akṣara*). Significantly, Yājñavalkya articulates this knowledge in gendered terms which emphasises that the imperishable is important knowledge specifically for a man to know before he dies:

Without knowing this imperishable, Gārgī, even if a man were to make offerings, to offer sacrifices, and to perform austerities in this world for many thousands of years, all that would come to naught. Pitiful is the man, Gārgī, who departs from this world without knowing this imperishable. But a man who departs from this world after he has come to know this imperishable – he, Gārgī, is a Brahmin [*sa brāhmaṇaḥ*].<sup>75</sup>

Here, Yājñavalkya's teaching connects Upaniṣadic knowledge with a specifically male soteriology. His use of the masculine pronoun 'sa', especially when addressing a woman, suggests that only a man can become a brahmin. The implication of Yājñavalkya's teaching is that despite coming from a brahmin family, because of her gender Gārgī can never truly be a brahmin.

However, we could also interpret this as Yājñavalkya indirectly bestowing the status of brahmin onto Gārgī. As we have seen, in a number of instances the status of brahmin in the Upaniṣads is based on knowledge of the discourse rather than by birth. Yājñavalkya names Janaka as a brahmin when the king proves his knowledge, and

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<sup>75</sup> BU 3.8.10.

Satyakāma becomes a brahmin despite not knowing his family lineage. Thus, by implication, if Gārgī can know the imperishable then she can become a brahmin. This seems to be the interpretation supported by the text, as after equating the status of brahmin with knowledge of the imperishable, Yājñavalkya proceeds to teach Gārgī about the imperishable, thus implying that Gārgī could learn it. Consequently, as one who can know the imperishable, Gārgī is placed in contradistinction to men who perform more traditional Vedic practices, like making offerings, offering sacrifices and performing austerities. In this respect, one of the functions of female characters like Gārgī, as well as *kṣatriya* characters, is to criticise more traditional brahmins.

Gārgī's superior status in relation to Yājñavalkya's other, more conservative opponents is further emphasised by the fact that she is the only one of Yājñavalkya's challengers who is not directly silenced by his words, but manages to get the last word herself by addressing the other brahmins: 'Distinguished Brahmins! [*brāhmaṇā bhagavantāḥ*] You should consider yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects. None of you will ever defeat him in a theological discussion [*brahmodya*]'.<sup>76</sup> By explicitly naming the discussion a *brahmodya*, Gārgī inscribes her own presence and voice within a discursively sanctioned activity.<sup>77</sup> Gārgī is the only participant in the discussion to employ the term *brahmodya*, and with this short speech and warning to the other brahmins, Gārgī gets in the last word in this exchange with Yājñavalkya and consequently does not completely give in to Yājñavalkya's authority. Importantly, Gārgī never admits that she is convinced by Yājñavalkya's answers, but only that she recognises his superiority over all the other

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<sup>76</sup> BU 3.8.12.

<sup>77</sup> Thompson has argued that there is a close connection between the *brahmodya* and the *satyakriyā*: A *brahmodya* (utterance of *brahman*) 'is a means of *self-display*, on the one hand, of one's mastery of the esoteric lexicon and, on the other hand, of one's personal authority or power. It therefore provides an area also for the performance of a *satyakriyā*' (1997: 20).

brahmins. She positions her own authority with Yājñavalkya's ability to defeat the other brahmins, indirectly situating herself on the winning side of the debate. Consequently, despite not winning the debate explicitly, Gārgī manages to put her own frame around their argument and to align herself with the victor. She is the one who pronounces Yājñavalkya as the superior orator, which implies that she has the authority, or at least claims the authority, to pronounce the winner.

That she does have the authority is suggested by the fact that Gārgī's warning to the other brahmins is similar to Svaidāyana's warning the northern brahmins about Uddālaka Āruṇi's ability to shatter heads apart. In the case of Svaidāyana, the narrative implies that he is only able to recognise Uddālaka's knowledge because he himself has just defeated Uddālaka in a *brahmodya*. Similarly, although Gārgī does not explicitly defeat Yājñavalkya, her ability to recognise his superiority over the other brahmins suggests that she has the knowledge to fully understand what Yājñavalkya knows.

Another feature of this debate that Gārgī shares in common with Draupadī and Śakuntalā is the intervention of an authoritative male speaker. Both Draupadī and Śakuntalā discuss *dharma* in the *sabhā*, where they not only speak, but openly challenge political authority in their discussions. Interestingly, Draupadī and Śakuntalā both have their arguments and reputations questioned, but ultimately get their way by means of an outside intervention. And in both cases, even though they do not explicitly win their arguments, Draupadī and Śakuntalā end up victorious.

Similarly, Gārgī speaks convincingly in a public assembly and is shown to be relatively superior to a number of the other participants. Although she shows her mastery of the discourse, her knowledge is challenged by Yājñavalkya. Importantly, as with Draupadī and Śakuntalā, there is an intervention: in this case in the form of



Uddālaka's challenge to Yājñavalkya. Uddālaka intervenes in the *brahmodya* at precisely the moment when Yājñavalkya threatens Gārgī, offering a counter attack in which he challenges Yājñavalkya with the same fatal consequence of his head shattering apart. It is only after Uddālaka intervenes that Gārgī resumes her debate and it is at this point when she specifically appeals to the other brahmins to bear witness to her arguments and makes her prediction about the outcome of the debate. Thus, despite not explicitly defeating Yājñavalkya, Gārgī openly mocks him and emerges triumphant in the outcome of the *brahmodya*.

Findly has argued that Gārgī's challenge represents heterodox ideas and practices. Against the scholarly trajectory that presents women as silently preserving the tradition without any challenge, she reads Gārgī's line of questioning to Yājñavalkya as an articulation of heterodox views: 'Rarely, however, have these scholars investigated the possible cracks in the veneer of India's past, cracks that may show women not only as bearers of a preserved cultural tradition but also, perhaps, as precisely the opposite: vehicles for cultural innovation and, more interestingly, for heterodox ideas and practices'.<sup>78</sup> Findly identifies Gārgī's method of regressive questioning as a new style of argumentation and suggests that this method anticipates the later Buddhist teaching of causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Although Gārgī does represent innovative ideas and practices, this is not exemplified in her regressive questioning. For example, towards the end of his encounter with Yājñavalkya, Śakalya also asks a series of questions that closely resemble Gārgī's method of interrogation.<sup>79</sup>

In fact, not only do other speakers employ this style of questioning, but the regressive method highlights an important aspect of Upaniṣadic discourse. As Brereton

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<sup>78</sup> Findly 1985: 38.

<sup>79</sup> BU 3.9.22.

points out, many teachers, especially Yājñavalkya, organise the worlds through constructing hierarchies: 'Upaniṣadic sages set up a system of levels that show which powers include other powers or which are dependent on which others. Ultimately, by moving towards progressively deeper levels, the sage identifies the fundamental principles on which everything else is established'.<sup>80</sup> In this case, far from showing philosophical innovation, Gārgī's method of questioning displays her familiarity with one of the most characteristic methods for organising knowledge in the Upaniṣads.

Nevertheless, Findly rightly points out that female characters often serve to represent unorthodox or rival views. In Gārgī's case, she poses her challenge to orthodoxy not so much by what she says, but how she speaks and conducts her arguments. As we have seen, she appeals to the truth, addresses the assembly, employs sarcasm and adopts an aggressive mode of address. By means of these debating techniques she both displays her knowledge of the practice of the *brahmodya*, as well as proves her superiority over the Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins.

#### **G. Women and Gandharvas: The lack of authority for female speakers**

Despite Gārgī's strong challenge to Yājñavalkya, one of the central issues in Gārgī's participation in this *brahmodya* is the lack of authority of women's speech. In the case of Gārgī, the text undermines her authority by the fact that any success against Yājñavalkya is muted and indirect. Although her words are shown to be true and prophetic, there is no explicit acknowledgement of her achievements. Nevertheless, at least Gārgī's participation is acknowledged, as she is the only woman who is physically present at the debate. There are indications that other female voices also are

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<sup>80</sup> Brereton 1990: 124

represented in the discussion, although indirectly.<sup>81</sup> Similar to when Gārgī captures Yājñavalkya's attention by adopting the mode of address of a male warrior, these other women are only heard after their voices have been filtered through the identities of male subjects. As Grace Jantzen has pointed out in a discussion about Lacan, when men control the discourse, there are severe limitations on the representation of female subjectivity: 'There can be no women subjects. Women qua women, therefore, cannot speak. When women speak, when women take up subject positions, it is not as women, but as imitation males, men in drag'.<sup>82</sup> In the Upaniṣads we see that on a number of occasions women do speak, yet the authority for female speakers is continually denied. This is the case in this *brahmodya*, where there are women whose voices are only heard when they are connected with male speakers.

When challenging Yājñavalkya in Janaka's court, both Bhujyu Lāhyāyani and Uddālaka Āruṇi preface their questions with an account of visiting the brahmin teacher Patañcala Kāpya in Madras when they were wandering students. Bhujyu recounts that Patañcala had a daughter who was possessed by a Gandharva (*gandharvagrhitā*). In Uddālaka's account all the details are the same except that in this case it is Patañcala's wife who is possessed. In both cases a female character is named, but any speech associated with them is attributed to a Gandharva. Significantly, Bhujyu and Uddālaka do not merely recount learning from a Gandharva, but both of them specifically mention the identities of the women who are possessed. In this way, the identities of these women are considered necessary details in the narrative, yet the agencies of these two women as speaking subjects are completely denied. When we consider this episode in the context of the general lack of authority of female speakers in the

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<sup>81</sup> BU 3.3.1 & 3.7.1

<sup>82</sup> Jantzen 1998: 43.

Upaniṣads, then it is possible that both Bhujyu and Uddālaka were seeing a woman and hearing a female voice, but could not attribute the authority of the doctrine to a female speaker.<sup>83</sup>

Keith briefly acknowledged the possibility of attributing the speech of these Gandharvas to the women they possessed: 'Women are not excluded from contests, a maiden seized by a Gandharva ... shows herself an adept' in Upaniṣadic discourse.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, Roebuck has suggested that in these episodes the women act as oracles.<sup>85</sup> Gandharvas have a special connection with women throughout Vedic literature, most notably the Gandharva Viśvāvasu, who was known to visit brides on their wedding nights.<sup>86</sup> Because of this already established connection, the presence of the Gandharvas in these episodes in the BU, rather than hide the original speakers altogether, emphasise their gender as female.

One of the crucial questions regarding these curious episodes is whether or not the daughter and the wife visibly assume the form of a Gandharva or if they look the same and act as ventriloquists for the voice of the Gandharva. In both episodes these women are described as *gandharvagr̥hītā*. The Sanskrit term *gr̥hīta* means to be 'grasped, taken or seized' and Monier Williams defines *gandharvagr̥hītā* as 'to be possessed by a Gandharva'. However, in these passages we do not know exactly what it means to be a *gandharvagr̥hītā*. Do Patañcala's wife and daughter retain their own identities, or do they assume the visible characteristics of the Gandharva?

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<sup>83</sup> Additionally, both Gandharvas have names that link them to the Atharvaveda; the first Gandharva is named Sudhanvan Āṅgīrasa and the second is named Kabandha Ātharvaṇa. Like the early Upaniṣads, the Atharvaveda situates itself within the Vedic tradition, yet in contradistinction to a number of more conservative or orthodox practices of Vedic ritualism. In view of Findly's argument that women are often the voices of innovation and change, it is significant that these figures of the Atharvaveda speak through women.

<sup>84</sup> Keith 1925: 506.

<sup>85</sup> Roebuck 2000: 472.

<sup>86</sup> The Upaniṣads show that they know of this tradition in the final section of the BU: 'Get up Viśvāvasu, and leave this place; Find yourself some other luscious girl. This wife is here with her husband' (BU 6.4.19). This passage is similar to RV 10.85.21.

A similar episode in the JB recounts another story of a woman possessed by a Gandharva, however in the JB the term *gandharviṇī* is used.<sup>87</sup> The JB tells us that Udara, the son of Śāṇḍilya, wishes to perform an *ekatrika* sacrifice. He makes this decision in his mind and does not tell anyone about it. When Udara's wife is possessed the Gandharva tells her that Udara is about to perform the sacrifice: 'This Gandharva approached her and said, "There is a rather dangerous sacrifice called the Ekatrika, and your husband wants to perform it"'.<sup>88</sup> After hearing this from the Gandharva, Udara's wife warns her husband not to perform this dangerous sacrifice.

The JB tells us simply that his wife became a '*gandharviṇī*'. Yet immediately after this, the Gandharva approaches her and begins speaking to her. After his wife shares with Udara what the Gandharva has said, Udara instructs her to ask the Gandharva if he will accomplish the sacrifice. The wife then asks the Gandharva and he again warns her of the dangers of performing the sacrifice. What is clear from this episode in the JB is that although the wife is said to be possessed or seized by the Gandharva, her form and appearance do not change. The fact that she maintains her own identity, separate from the Gandharva, is clear from the fact that her becoming a *gandharviṇī* is not noticeable to her husband. Also, she continues to interact with her husband and have a dialogue with the Gandharva. The major difference between these episodes is that in the JB the husband does not even notice that the Gandharva is inhabiting his wife's body, while in the BU both Bhujyu and Uddālaka are aware of the identities of the Gandharvas. Nevertheless, the JB account illustrates that possession by a Gandharva does not necessarily imply losing either form or identity.

Returning to the debate in Janaka's court, we see that these discourses, which have been ventriloquised through women, serve as important challenges to

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<sup>87</sup> JB 2.126. This passage has been translated and interpreted by O'Flaherty (1985: 91-92).

<sup>88</sup> JB 2.126 (O'Flaherty 1985: 91).

Yājñavalkya. This is especially the case with Uddālaka's challenge, because his counter attack is delivered with the threat that Yājñavalkya's head will shatter apart if he does not know this discourse. Thus, it is Patañcala's wife's discourse, ventriloquised by the Gandharva, then repeated by Uddālaka, that Yājñavalkya has to prove that he knows if he wants to avoid his head shattering apart. Nevertheless, although these discourses are linked to female identities, Patañcala Kāpya's wife and daughter are not acknowledged as speakers. In fact, their speech is doubly removed: it is both attributed to the Gandharvas and also the Gandharvas' speech is recounted by eminent Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins. Here, the words of women are accepted within Vedic discourse, yet women themselves are given no authority.

#### H. Jabālā and indirect speech:

Jabālā is another female character whose words are authoritative, yet whose voice is mediated by male speakers. Jabālā, the mother of Satyakāma, is one of the more interesting female characters in the Upaniṣads.<sup>89</sup> Most commentators have focused on the truthfulness of her son Satyakāma who earns the status of a brahmin by honestly admitting that he is uncertain about his lineage when he approaches a brahmin teacher.

Indeed, in Chapter One we looked at this tale from the point of view of Satyakāma as a model *brahmacārin*. As we have seen, this story addresses the importance of a pedagogical lineage in contrast to a family lineage. The story begins when Satyakāma asks his mother about his lineage because he wants to be a Vedic student, and later, when he approaches the teacher Hāridrumata, the first question he asks Satyakāma is: 'Son, what is your lineage (*gotra*)?'<sup>90</sup> Satyakāma then repeats what

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<sup>89</sup> CU 4.4.1-5.

<sup>90</sup> CU 4.4.5.

his mother had told him, that he does not know his lineage because his mother moved around a lot when she was younger and consequently does not know the identity of his father.<sup>91</sup> Satyakāma is then praised by Hāridrumata for his honesty: ‘Who but a Brahmin could speak like that! Fetch some firewood, son. I will perform your initiation. You have not strayed from the truth’.<sup>92</sup> Thus, Satyakāma is accepted as a brahmin student because of his truthfulness.

A different picture emerges, however, when we focus on how this dialogue portrays his mother Jabālā. Although it is described, it is not emphasised in the narrative how Satyakāma learns how to be truthful. When Satyakāma asks his mother about his lineage, it is she who is admirably truthful: ‘Son, I don’t know what your lineage is. I was young when I had you. I was a maid then and had a lot of relationships. As such, it is impossible for me to say what your lineage is. But my name is Jabālā, and your name is Satyakāma. So you should simply say that you are Satyakāma Jābālā’.<sup>93</sup> When we consider Jabālā’s explanation in light of Upaniṣadic attempts to define women as wives and sexual partners for brahmin men, it is quite extraordinary that she is so honest about her non-conforming sexual activity. In this respect, she is the real truth lover (*satyakāma*), because she is admitting details about herself which are clearly not in accordance with normative sexual practices described in other passages in the Upaniṣads.

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<sup>91</sup> Jabālā explains that when Satyakāma was conceived she was young (*yauvana*) and was traveling around as a maid-servant (*carantī paricārīṇī*). Jabālā implies, at least, that she had several relationships and it is clear that Satyakāma was born out of wedlock.

<sup>92</sup> CU 4.4.5.

<sup>93</sup> CU 4.4.1 (*nāham etad veda, tāta, yad gotras tvam asi, bahv aham carantī paricārīṇī yauvane tvām alabhe, sāham etan na veda yad-gotras tvam asi, jabālā-tu nāmāham asmi, satyakāmo nāma tvam asi, sa satyakāma eva jābālo bruvītha iti*). Olivelle translates *carantī paricārīṇī* as a ‘maid’ having ‘a lot of relationships’ (see his note, 1996: 341 n.). Olivelle’s rendering differs considerably from previous translators who have preferred a more literal interpretation. Hume, for example, translates; ‘I went about a great deal serving as a maid’. Although Olivelle’s translation might be considered overly provocative, especially his introduction of the word ‘relationships’, Jabālā does imply that she had several sexual encounters.

Additionally, Satyakāma's acceptance as a Vedic student acknowledges, again indirectly, the education and upbringing that Jabālā has provided for her son. The fact that Satyakāma not only learns from his mother, but that the narrative has him approach his mother and speak first makes Jabālā, at least symbolically, the teacher of her son. And later, Hāridrumata clearly is impressed with this young man who has approached him to be his student. Not only is he truthful, but as we have seen in the first chapter, Satyakāma is polite and respectful. In fact, his approach to his teacher most closely resembles how a student should approach his teacher as outlined in the *upanayana* in the ŚB. The narrative does not provide us with further details, yet we can only assume that he has learned how to be honest and respectful from his mother. This indicates that Jabālā is familiar with initiation rites and has instructed her son in how to approach his teacher, thus properly preparing her son for a brahmin education. Additionally, when he explains to Hāridrumata about his lineage, Satyakāma quotes his mother's words exactly and follows his mother's advice that he should refer to himself as Satyakāma Jābāla. From this perspective, the fundamental reason that he is accepted as a Vedic student is because he has listened to his mother.

Because his truthfulness is linked to him directly quoting the words of his mother, we see another way in which a female voice is diluted in its authority. It is her speech, not his, that is the means by which Satyakāma becomes a brahmin. However, her words only attain acceptance by a brahmin when they are spoken by her son. Indeed, when Hāridrumata responds to Satyakāma's verbatim account of his mother's story, he exclaims that only a brahmin could speak like this. However, surely Jabālā would not have been praised as a brahmin if she had spoken directly to Hāridrumata. Thus, although Jabālā emerges as an independent and wise woman, who provides a solid education and upbringing for Satyakāma, there is no explicit acknowledgement



of these character traits in the narrative. Despite the fact that she is responsible for Satyakāma's acceptance as a brahmin, her own voice is not acknowledged.

Another example of a woman whose speech is indirectly connected to the words of an Upaniṣadic teacher is Satyakāma's wife. Like other Upaniṣadic wives, the narrative does not give her a name. Her words are given only an indirect authority as she predicts an event that later materialises. When Satyakāma is about to go on a journey and leave his student behind, she warns him: 'The student has performed his austerities and faithfully tended the fires. Teach him before the fires beat you to it'.<sup>94</sup> Instead of listening to his wife, Satyakāma leaves his home and when he returns his student, as his wife had anticipated, has been taught by the fires. Here Satyakāma's wife both predicts what will happen and displays a certain understanding of the process of Vedic learning.

Furthermore, the speech of Satyakāma's wife and that of the fires is almost exactly the same. Before the fires begin teaching Upakosala, they remark: 'The student has performed his austerities and faithfully tended the fires'.<sup>95</sup> The similarity in speech establishes a connection between Satyakāma's wife and the teaching of the fires. Keeping in mind how the teachings of female speakers can be ventriloquised through male characters, it is significant that Satyakāma's wife is connected to the fires, who become Upakosala's teachers, pointing to the possibility that she is Upakosala's real teacher. Additionally, it is her advice to Upakosala to eat some food that initially leads to his instruction from the fires. When Satyakāma departs on his journey, his wife notices that Upakosala is not eating and encourages him to eat something.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>94</sup> CU 4.10.2 (*tapto brahmacārī, kuśalam agnīn paricacārīn, mā tvāgnayaḥ paripravocan, prabrūhy asmā iti*).

<sup>95</sup> CU 4.10.4 (*tapto brahmacārī, kuśalam naḥ paryacārī, hantāsmāi prabravāmeti*).

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, Olivelle speculates that Upakosala stops eating because of a sexual ailment related to the fact that he had not been permitted to leave home and get married (Olivelle 1996: 342 n.).

she is familiar with Uddālaka's teaching that one cannot learn without proper nourishment. Admittedly, it is speculative to suggest that Satyakāma's wife is the real teacher of this discourse, but the similarity between her speech and the instruction of the fires indicates that she has the knowledge to teach her husband's student, even if she did not do the actual teaching. In this way, Satyakāma's wife and his mother, Jabālā, are similar in the sense that both of them have important words to say that are only acknowledged as important when spoken by someone else.

### I. Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī: *ātman* versus *strīprājñā*

Although Gārgī and Jabālā are characteristic for their independence, the most standard representation of women in the Upaniṣads is in the role of the dutiful wife to the learned brahmin man. In this way, the early Upaniṣads share with the Brāhmaṇas a similar view of the importance of marriage. According to the sacrificial texts, the ideal women was the *patnī*, or the partner to her husband in ritual practices. As Jamison explains:

One of the main technical requirements for being a Sacrificer is that he must be a householder (*grhastha*); he must be *married*. Not only that but the presence and participation of his wife is required to all solemn rituals. Sacrificer's Wife (*patnī* in Sanskrit) is a *structural role* in ritual with particular duties and activities that cannot ordinarily be performed by anyone else.<sup>97</sup>

Although restricted in her actions, the sacrificer's wife was not only essential in her mere presence, but her actions were both symbolically important and unique, in the sense that her actions could not be performed by anyone else. As Jamison explains, the *patnī* 'acts independently of her husband: she is not merely his double or shadow in ritual performance'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Jamison 1996: 30.

<sup>98</sup> Jamison 1996: 38.

Similarly, a number of Upaniṣadic stories present the brahmin's wife as both necessary and marginal. In fact, many of the dialogues indicate that wives, although not given the official status of teacher, contribute to the transmission of Upaniṣadic knowledge, and there are a number of brahmin wives who speak and display their familiarity with Upaniṣadic discourses and practices. Similar to other female speakers like Gārgī and Jabālā, brahmin wives often speak about the same things as eminent brahmin teachers, yet their speech is not granted the same legitimacy. Despite these limitations, we see that when the social location of Upaniṣadic discourse is the brahmin household, there is a certain amount of knowledge that is required for women to learn in order for knowledge to be able to produce the results that it promises. Brahmin wives are expected, therefore, to know important teachings and participate in rituals for the sake of their husband's immortality.

The story of Yājñavalkya and his two wives offers two competing ideals of the brahmin wife. Although Maitreyī is explicitly praised for her interest in Upaniṣadic teachings, the knowledge of Yājñavalkya's other wife, the voiceless Kātyāyanī, is equally reinforced. Besides Gārgī, Maitreyī is the only other female character who is explicitly depicted discussing philosophy in the Upaniṣads. She appears twice, in almost identical dialogues in the BU.<sup>99</sup> In both dialogues, Yājñavalkya wants to make a settlement between Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī before he departs.<sup>100</sup> Although these

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<sup>99</sup> BU 2.4.1-14 & 4.5.1-15. Reinvang explains that most probably each of the two recensions of the BU at one point adopted the Upaniṣadic section of the other recension so that both recensions came to include two versions of the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī (2000: 146-147).

<sup>100</sup> It is significant that Yājñavalkya intends to divide his estate between his two wives. This indicates that women could own wealth and property. This is in contrast to earlier Vedic texts that not only deny women inheritance rights, but claim that the wife did not have her own possessions, and indeed did not even own herself. Findly argues that this passage 'casts Yājñavalkya as an early champion of economic rights' (Findly 1985: 46). Witzel cites numerous texts that explicitly deny a woman entitlement to inheritance (MS 3.7.9: 88.5; KS 24.8: 98.13; TS 6.2.1) (Witzel 1996: 165).

versions are quite similar, there are some important differences which elicit different interpretations of Maitreyī's character.

In the first version, Yājñavalkya approaches Maitreyī saying, 'Look – I am about to depart from this place. So, come let me make a settlement between you and Kātyāyanī'.<sup>101</sup> Significantly, it is Yājñavalkya who speaks first to Maitreyī to begin his teaching. When we look at this episode in the context of the other Upaniṣadic dialogues, it is interesting that Yājñavalkya initiates the conversation, but does not end up learning from Maitreyī. Throughout the Upaniṣads, we have seen three kinds one to one that frame the philosophical discussions. In the first type, a student, usually carrying firewood, approaches his teacher and asks for instruction. The second case is the private *brahmodya*. On these occasions, two brahmins debate and the winner becomes the teacher of the loser. The third kind involves brahmins and *kṣatriyas*. As we have seen, in these cases the brahmin usually speaks first to the king, only to end up as his student. In all of these cases, the person who approaches the other becomes the student, either initially or eventually. Not only does Maitreyī's dialogue differ from others in this way, but also there are no formal indicators, like firewood, to make this conversation an official teaching. This suggests that even when brahmins do teach women, it is not presented as a formal instruction and women cannot claim the authority of a proper education.

Rather than the typical circumstances for an Upaniṣadic teaching, the occasion for Yājñavalkya's instruction is his imminent departure (*ud yā*). Yājñavalkya's departure has usually been interpreted as his taking up a life of asceticism, yet in the

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<sup>101</sup> BU 2.4.1. For the purpose of this discussion we will refer to BU 2.4.1-14 as the first version and BU 4.5.1-15 as the second version. See Reinvang (2000) for a detailed discussion about the relative chronology of these versions.

first version of the dialogue this is not indicated.<sup>102</sup> As Olivelle has noted, in the first version the reasons for Yājñavalkya's departure are unclear: Although 'it is traditionally assumed that he was leaving home to assume an ascetic way of life ... in this version ... the setting is probably the immanent death of Yājñavalkya, which would necessitate the partitioning of his estate'.<sup>103</sup> Following Olivelle, it is worth considering that discussions about *ātman* are often associated with understanding the process of death and that much of this discussion with Maitreyī is related to immortality. Additionally, Yājñavalkya begins teaching Maitreyī after she suggests that Yājñavalkya's wealth is not important to her because it could not make her immortal, further suggesting that Yājñavalkya's imminent departure is related to death.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, that Yājñavalkya approaches Maitreyī and that he is about to die is reminiscent of the several passages that describe the transmission of knowledge from father to son, before the father's death.<sup>104</sup> As we have seen, in these passages it is suggested that immortality is achieved by passing on one's *ātman* to the son. This dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī is also about passing on knowledge of *ātman*. But, presumably because he does not have any sons, Yājñavalkya passes his knowledge onto his wife. When we look at this episode in the context of the father/son ceremony, we see that the dialogue represents an alternative to the traditional structure. Importantly, on other occasions it is Yājñavalkya who teaches that a man does not need to have sons to achieve immortality. Here, he

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<sup>102</sup> Radhakrishnan, for example, comments: 'Yājñavalkya wishes to renounce the stage of the householder, *gr̥has̥tha* and enter that of the anchorite, *vānaprastha* (1953: 195).

<sup>103</sup> Olivelle 1996: 306 n.

<sup>104</sup> BU 1.5.17; KsU 2.14.

indicates that he can achieve immortality by means of passing on knowledge to his wife.<sup>105</sup>

The second version gives us a lot more information regarding the characters of both Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī.<sup>106</sup> It begins by telling us that Yājñavalkya had two wives and gives us further descriptions of both of their personalities: ‘Maitreyī was a woman who took part in theological discussions [*brahmavādinī*], while Kātyāyanī’s understanding was limited to womanly matters [*strīprajñā*].’<sup>107</sup> Here Maitreyī is described favourably, while Kātyāyanī functions as a foil to emphasise Maitreyī’s interest in philosophical discussion. The favourable depiction of Maitreyī continues when Yājñavalkya addresses Maitreyī saying, ‘You have always been very dear to me, and now you have made yourself even more so’.<sup>108</sup> These words clearly show that Maitreyī earns extra favour in Yājñavalkya’s eyes explicitly because of her interest in discussing philosophy. Thus, the second version introduces details about the character of Maitreyī which describes her positively because of her interest in Upaniṣadic discourse. This is illustrative of a tension throughout the Upaniṣads regarding the place of women in philosophical discussions. On the one hand, many of the discourses explicitly marginalise women from philosophical discourse, while in contexts like this dialogue, individual women are described positively because of their interest in philosophy.

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<sup>105</sup> That a wife can be the student of her husband is suggested by Manu, which equates marriage with the *upanayana* for women (MDS 2.67).

<sup>106</sup> Most scholars agree that these additional details in the second version are an interpolation. See Reinvang 2000.

<sup>107</sup> BU 4.5.1. The Sanskrit word here is *brahmavādinī* (a woman who is interested in philosophical discussions), which is also used to describe Draupadī (Mbh 4.1.3; 13.2.83).

<sup>108</sup> BU 4.5.5. That the Upaniṣads considered knowledge an important attribute in women is further emphasised at the end of the BU (6.4.17), where a procreation ritual is described that can produce a daughter that is learned (*paṇḍitā*). However, as we will see, a learned daughter in the Upaniṣads might conform more to Kātyāyanī’s *strīprajñā* than to Maitreyī as a *brahmavādinī*.

Although she is praised for her interest in Upaniṣadic discourse, both accounts suggest that she does not completely comprehend Yājñavalkya's teaching. However, there is a difference between the two versions as to what brings about Maitreyī's confusion (*muh*). In the second version she is generally confused by Yājñavalkya's discourse as a whole: 'You have utterly confused me. I cannot perceive this at all'.<sup>109</sup> In the first version, however, she is more specific. Here she says: 'You have totally confused me by saying "after death there is no awareness"'.<sup>110</sup> Thus, in the first version of the dialogue, Maitreyī is not portrayed as confused by philosophy in general, but rather is merely challenging Yājñavalkya on a specific point. In fact, the precision of her question suggests that she has been following quite well what Yājñavalkya has been saying. Furthermore, her confusion is actually quite understandable considering that the dialogue began as a discussion about immortality, but then Yājñavalkya concludes that there is no awareness after death. Reinvang's reading of this dialogue implies that Maitreyī's confusion is not necessarily brought about by her own inability to understand, but rather by Yājñavalkya's muddled explanation: 'Maitreyī is worried and confused as the fact that there, supposedly, is no consciousness after death would seem to make a state of immortality impossible'.<sup>111</sup> Reinvang suggests that Yājñavalkya is 'deliberately obscuring' how his teaching relates to immortality: 'The text is intriguing as it does the opposite of what one anticipates. Maitreyī anticipates the unraveling of how one may attain immortality, but

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<sup>109</sup> BU 4.5.14.

<sup>110</sup> BU 2.4.13. Reinvang attributes these narrative differences of the second version to the addition of a number of interpolations in Yājñavalkya's teaching: 'Maitreyī's objection has been reformulated from the original remark that she does not understand there is no *saṃjñā* [awareness] after death, to a more general statement saying that she does not understand "this" (*idam*)'. He argues that consequently, Yājñavalkya's teaching in the second version does not fit together: '...the substantial edition of the latter part of the text ends up presenting the reader with a less coherent exposition of the nature of immortality (2000: 191-2).

<sup>111</sup> Reinvang 2000: 181-2.

is being told that there is [no] knowledge of anything after death'.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps it is not so much that Maitreyī is confused, as she is pointing out to her husband that he is not making sense. In this way, it is possible to see Maitreyī's claim to be confused as a polite way of challenging her husband. As we have seen, Gārgī sarcastically praises Yājñavalkya as a way of indirectly pointing out that he has not answered her questions. Similarly, Yājñavalkya ultimately answers Maitreyī by disclosing one of his more characteristic teachings of *ātman*. Thus, in his discussions with both Gārgī and Maitreyī, Yājñavalkya only reveals his best teaching after they question his knowledge.

Another difference between the two accounts is that the first dialogue ends inconclusively, while the second version ends by saying that Yājñavalkya taught Maitreyī everything about immortality: 'There, I have given you the instruction, Maitreyī. That's all there is to immortality'.<sup>113</sup> Again, these details serve to portray Maitreyī differently. In the second version, Maitreyī's confusion is highlighted, yet the conclusion of the dialogue positively suggests that Maitreyī has learned everything about immortality. In the first version, however, what Maitreyī learns remains unresolved.

Maitreyī's character takes on other dimensions when we further compare her to Kātyāyanī, Yājñavalkya's other wife. Kātyāyanī is named, yet she does not speak herself. In the first version there is no description of her character, but in the second version she is characterised as a woman who is only interested in women's knowledge (*strīprajñā*).<sup>114</sup> As Maitreyī's interests in learning philosophy is praised, Kātyāyanī and her woman's knowledge are presented as inferior to the exalted position of

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<sup>112</sup> Reinvang 2000: 182.

<sup>113</sup> BU 4.5.15.

<sup>114</sup> BU 4.5.1.



philosophy. However, Kātyāyanī fares quite well in Yājñavalkya's settlement and her knowledge is more representative of what Upaniṣadic discourse prescribes for women to know. Śaṅkara glosses *strīprajñā* as 'minding household needs'.<sup>115</sup> Roebuck, however, suggests that *strīprajñā* is specific to the knowledge of a brahmin wife, claiming that *strīprajñā* does not refer to 'what all women know' but rather to 'what every priest's wife knows: what food and robes her husband will need for each ritual, etc.'. <sup>116</sup> Other dialogues suggest that this knowledge would also include managing the household and filling in for the priestly duties of her husband in his absence. We have seen, for example, that Satyakāma's wife looked after his student and contributed to his instruction when Satyakāma was away.

Another example is Āṭikī, whose 'woman's knowledge' is an important survival skill which ultimately is responsible for Uṣasti securing the job as chief priest at a sacrifice.<sup>117</sup> Uṣasti is portrayed as a brahmin who is struggling for food and money and has to beg to support both himself and Āṭikī. The narrative tells us that after receiving leftovers from a rich man, 'Uṣasti took the remains to his wife. But she had already gathered ample almsfood. So she took what Uṣasti gave her and saved it'.<sup>118</sup> This is an interesting detail because it shows that Āṭikī is not dependent on her husband for food and in fact feeds both of them due to her own resourcefulness.

The story continues, relating that the next day Uṣasti said: 'If only I had some food, I'd be able to earn some money'.<sup>119</sup> This remark is similar to Uddālaka's

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<sup>115</sup> Findly 1985: 46.

<sup>116</sup> Roebuck 2000: 90. Fišer points out that managing the household of Yājñavalkya must have been a considerable task when we take into account the wealth that he amasses: 'She was probably though of as having been in charge of Yājñavalkya's household which must have been at least for those times, an establishment of considerable size – provided that we are to accept the hints of large royal donations bestowed on Yājñavalkya' (1984: 84).

<sup>117</sup> CU 1.10.1-6.

<sup>118</sup> CU 1.10.5.

<sup>119</sup> CU 1.10.6.

teaching to Śvetaketu that one cannot remember the Vedic chants properly without food. In this case, it implies that Uṣasti can only earn money as an officiating priest if he eats. At this point in the story Āṭikī speaks for the first time: ‘But, my lord, we still have the groats’.<sup>120</sup> The narrative relates that he then ate the groats and was able to successfully perform the sacrifice, and consequently earn a lot of money. Although the story does not explicitly credit Āṭikī for her part in earning the money, it is clear from the details of the story that it is due to her resourcefulness that Uṣasti is able to perform the sacrifice correctly. While Āṭikī’s character is generally underdeveloped, her actions are crucial to the outcome of the story.

Another significant detail of this characterisation of Āṭikī is that she is presented as the one who controls the food for her husband and herself. In addition to Āṭikī, in all the descriptions of procreation practices where a mixture was to be made and then eaten, the narrative explicitly states that the brahmin’s wife should prepare the food. Also Satyakāma’s wife is linked with food, as she is the one who encourages Upakosala to eat. These examples indicate that an important aspect of *strīprajña* was cooking and distributing food in the household. Furthermore, these examples return us to the complexities surrounding female agency in the Upaniṣads. On the one hand, Āṭikī is depicted as an individual with considerable autonomy, exercising influence over her husband. On the other hand, her agency is derived from her position as wife. Jamison makes a similar pointing regard to how female characters are represented in the Mahābhārata: Through marriage a woman ‘gains access to whatever active roles exist for women’.<sup>121</sup> Similarly in the Upaniṣads, women who are married tend to

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<sup>120</sup> CU 1.10.7.

<sup>121</sup> Jamison 1996: 354.

assume the active roles of ritual participants, dispensers of food and looking after her husband's students.

Returning to Kātyāyanī, although she does not display philosophical knowledge, she stands to gain more through *strīprajñā* than most people in the marketplace of Upaniṣadic discourse. As Maitreyī rejects Yājñavalkya's offer of material wealth, Kātyāyanī's preference for women's knowledge might be exactly what makes her a very rich woman. Yājñavalkya accumulates more wealth than any other person in the Upaniṣads, and as he cynically states before the debate at Janaka's court, wealth is the real objective of Upaniṣadic knowledge. Accordingly, if the cows, not to mention the gold, are the ultimate prize for philosophical knowledge, then Kātyāyanī is the real winner in her settlement with Yājñavalkya, especially when we consider the gender bias of the texts that generally calls into question the ability of women to achieve immortality. As we have seen, towards the end of her discussion, Maitreyī admits that she is confused by what Yājñavalkya tells her, and the first version ends with a question that Yājñavalkya poses, but which remains unanswered.<sup>122</sup> As Maitreyī is left with no possessions and confused by Yājñavalkya's teaching, perhaps the voiceless Kātyāyanī is actually quite wise in her silence.

#### **J. Conclusion:**

In this chapter we have looked at dialogues between brahmins and women, as well as a number of creation myths and procreation rituals. Taken together, these sections have demonstrated the gender implications of a number of Upaniṣadic teachings. Despite some doctrines that appeal to a universal self, the knowledge of which is available to

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<sup>122</sup> BU 2.4.13-14.

everyone, most of the teachings are part of an explicitly male soteriology, teaching that immortality is attained by means of having male children.

We began this chapter by looking at creation myths and procreation rituals. Significantly, in a number of accounts of creation the *ātman* is equated with the specifically male bodies of Puruṣa and Prajāpati. Yet, despite privileging the male body and the male role in creation, these myths also recognise the complementary roles of male and female in creation. In this way, these sections are representative of the ambiguous and unresolved portrayal of gender in the Upaniṣads.

Next, we looked at how procreation rites contribute to defining an Upaniṣadic ideal of masculinity. As soteriological goals like knowing *ātman* and achieving immortality are inextricably linked to producing male children, in order to ensure male progeny, the ideal brahmin man must not only be married, but he must be virile and have control over his wife. Accordingly, much of the discourse that addresses the interaction between brahmins and women attempts to define and control the process of procreation.

Additionally, the brahmin male world is depicted as aggressive and competitive, and one of the ways that brahmins prove their superiority over each other is through their ability to control their wives' sexual behaviour. In this respect, Yājñavalkya's interactions with Gārgī and Maitreyī offer an interesting challenge to brahmin orthodoxy. As Yājñavalkya teaches that immortality is not connected to producing male children, thus suggesting that there is less at stake in controlling sexual relations, he is able to share his knowledge with women without threatening his own soteriological goals.

Indeed, despite the numerous hesitations, restrictions, qualifications and modifications surrounding the role of women in the discourse, there are a number of

active female participants in Upaniṣadic narratives. Yet, as we have seen, a number of female characters speak the same words as men, but their words are denied authority. One of the recurring themes in the dialogues between brahmins and women is how female speakers negotiate with the limitations that restrict their participation. Gārgī circumvents these restrictions by debating tactically and thereby putting herself on the winning side of the argument; Jabālā, rather than attempt to become a brahmin herself, uses her knowledge to prepare her son for his education; Kātyāyanī, as we have suggested, accumulates vast amounts of wealth by remaining silent. Additionally, many of the narratives indicate that there are some Upaniṣadic teachings that women, at least the wives of brahmins, are expected to know. In these cases, a wife's contributions to her husbands soteriological ambitions are not merely reduced to her procreative role, but are established in her role in running the household, taking part in procreative rituals and even contributing to the transmission of Upaniṣadic knowledge. The fact that there are a number of discourses and practices that a wife needs to know, points of the possibility that women, at least the wives of brahmins, were an important audience of Upaniṣadic knowledge.

The central audience, however, is brahmin men and it is important to keep in mind that the female characters are mostly depicted in ways that reinforce the ideals of brahmin men. Although these interactions with women are central, they are only one aspect of the lives of brahmins and the quest to achieve selfhood. Throughout the Upaniṣads, the dialogues indicate that achieving selfhood is as much about what one does, how one lives one's life, as it is about what one knows: that much of understanding *ātman* is tied into becoming a brahmin. Accordingly, brahmins must not only learn from the proper teacher (chapter one), compete with other brahmins

## CONCLUSION:

Both commentators within the Indian tradition and modern scholars have treated the Upaniṣads primarily as a collection of abstract philosophical doctrines, analysing the transcendental claims without taking into consideration how philosophy is rooted within a social and historical context. It has been the intention of this thesis to look at the social dimensions of Upaniṣadic philosophy. Through highlighting and examining the dialogues we have demonstrated that the narrative episodes are not merely superfluous information or literary ornamentation, but fundamental aspects of the philosophical claims of the texts.

We have focused on the social context that is provided by the texts themselves. Crucially, however, as we have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the social world of the Upaniṣads is not the realm of myth or fantasy, but rather represents the real, at least in an idealised representation, social world of ancient Indian brahmins. This is not to claim that the concrete scenes depicted in the stories and dialogues are historically true: we have not claimed that the *brahmodya* in King Janaka's court actually happened, or that Pravāhaṇa really taught the doctrine of the five fires to Uddālaka Āruṇi. Rather, this thesis maintains that these scenes represent the kinds of episodes that were part of the social world of brahmins. We have shown that these four kinds of dialogues are both fundamental to the presentation of the ideas and fundamental activities in the life of a brahmin.

*Ātman* is the idea that is discussed most in the Upaniṣads and is defined and explained in a number of ways by different teachers. Despite the differences, however, knowledge of *ātman* consistently represents the new Upaniṣadic knowledge that is defined in contradistinction to the traditional Vedic knowledge about the sacrifice. The

dialogues not only serve to highlight teachings about *ātman*, but they also connect this knowledge to specific people and particular situations, indicating that knowledge of the self is particularly important to brahmins and a number of specific situations in a brahmin's life. Thus, by means of looking at the dialogues we have seen that the Upaniṣadic notion of the self is not merely a philosophical insight, but a way of living one's life.

We began by examining dialogues between teachers and students. These dialogues show an interest in the moment of instruction and record how knowledge is transmitted. By means of describing the interactions of specific characters, the dialogues outline modes of address and modes of behaviour that accompany the transmission of knowledge. Different teachers employ different means of instruction, but in all cases they follow the script of the *upanayana* and they all impart discourses about the self. Importantly, however, knowledge about the self is presented not only as a philosophical doctrine, but connected to particular activities in the life of a brahmin.

One of the central activities for brahmins is participating in the *brahmodya*. As we have seen, there are two main types of *brahmodya* that feature in the Upaniṣads: the private debates that establish a relative hierarchy among brahmins and the public tournaments, which are depicted as competitive, where the reputations of brahmins, and sometimes political power is at stake. The *brahmodya* is especially emphasised in the BU, where Yājñavalkya uses the public debate as a forum for establishing authority for both himself and his patron, King Janaka of Videha. Importantly, Yājñavalkya proves his superiority not only by displaying his knowledge of the discourse, but also by how he advances his arguments and marshals debating tactics. In addition to establishing himself as superior to a number of Kuru-Pañcāla brahmins, Yājñavalkya also emerges as quite wealthy. As performing sacrifices is no longer the

primary occupation of brahmins, Yājñavalkya is an example of how brahmins make a living in a changing world.

In addition to his success in winning philosophical debates, Yājñavalkya is also known for his friendly relationship with King Janaka. Indeed, the conversations between Yājñavalkya and Janaka are among several dialogues between brahmins and kings throughout the Upaniṣads. These dialogues often depict the king teaching the brahmin and in some cases even claim that particular doctrines originated among kings. As we have seen, however, these claims do not represent a historical reality, but rather demonstrate a literary strategy among brahmin composers to make both brahmins and their teachings indispensable to a king's political and military success. The dialogues do this by linking philosophical doctrines to political power and describing the ideal king as one who hosts philosophical debates and gives generously to brahmins. As such, the dialogues between brahmins and kings outline the proper modes of address and behaviour for brahmins to seek patronage from kings and for kings to secure the presence of brahmins in their court.

Besides kings, the other essential dialogical partners for brahmins are women. Much of Upaniṣadic discourse is concerned with securing immortality and most teachings connect immortality with having male children. Accordingly, a crucial aspect of Upaniṣadic discourse is about how to control sexual relations and the process of birth. Furthermore, these discourses establish idealised gender roles for men and women. Brahmin men are depicted as confrontational and aggressive, both in their interactions with other brahmin men, as well as in their relation with their wives. Women are defined primarily as procreative bodies and supportive wives, helping their husbands maintain the household fires and helping to prepare mixtures in procreation rites. Nevertheless, Gārgī and Maitreyī have a more active participation in



Upaniṣadic philosophy, as Gārgī in particular not only shows her knowledge of the discourse, but also demonstrates her understanding of the practice of philosophy by debating both tactically and aggressively.

Through focusing on the social situations provided by the dialogues we also have explored a number of related issues regarding the historical context of ancient India. The most fundamental change is a shift in attitude concerning the sacrifice. As we discussed in the introduction, we do not know for certain if economic or political pressures contributed to an actual decline in the practice of sacrifice. However, the early Upaniṣads both strongly criticise the sacrifice and focus on other activities as the practices which most give knowledge authority. This movement away from sacrifice at a textual level indicates that the composers and editors of the Upaniṣads were attempting to define their roles as brahmins in different ways to audiences who no longer found the sacrifice favourable. In fact, not only do brahmins define themselves as teachers and court priests rather than as ritualists, but also the ideal king is one who learns philosophy and hosts philosophical debates rather than one who is the patron of the sacrifice. In this way, the early Upaniṣads not only replace sacrifice with a number of different practices for brahmins, but discursive knowledge becomes the new political currency for brahmins that promises political and military success to kings.

Inextricably related to changing attitudes about the sacrifice are new means of establishing the status of brahmins. As we have seen, the Upaniṣads, on several occasions, criticise those who are merely brahmins based on their family lineage, and offer up new ways that individuals are considered brahmins. The new ideal was not someone born as a brahmin, but one who becomes a brahmin by learning about the self. Importantly, however, these changes do not suggest that the status of brahmin was open to everyone, but rather these new means for defining brahmins is mostly an

attempt to establish a hierarchy within the brahmin community. In most of the dialogues that make a point of distinguishing those who are brahmins by birth from those who are brahmins because of their knowledge, the individual in question is already a brahmin. For example, Śvetaketu is encouraged to go receive a proper education and Naciketas rejects the ritualism of his father. Both students are already brahmins by birth before they are initiated into the Upaniṣadic teachings of the self. Even in the case of Satyakāma, his family name suggests that he already came from a brahmin family. Thus, in all of these cases the point is not that knowledge about the self is enough to make one a brahmin, but rather for those who are already brahmins it is better to learn and teach about the self than to perform rituals. Defining a brahmin is fundamental because, as we have seen, one of the most important aspects of knowledge about the self is not merely the content of the doctrine, but also who is teaching. The dialogues illustrate that knowledge of the self is not an insight that one achieves through solitary introspection, but rather has to be received from the proper teacher by means of the accepted method of transmission; one can only understand the meaning of the self through someone else who knows.

The changing attitude about sacrifice and the new ways of defining brahmins are important themes in both the BU and CU, however the two texts differ in how they respond to these social changes. The CU is more traditional, offering up the ideal brahmin as both teacher and householder. Like the BU, the CU presents knowledge of the self as more important than performing sacrifices, yet the CU is more conservative in who can have access to this new knowledge by insisting that the teacher is more important than the knowledge itself and refusing to depict brahmins being initiated by kings.

The BU, however, pushes the critique of ritualism much further. Yājñavalkya, for example, establishes his knowledge, not by means of learning from the proper teacher, but through directly defeating more orthodox brahmins. Additionally, the BU does not refrain from showing brahmins being initiated by kings. The most radical change in the BU, however, is its critique of the brahmin household. Both through the teachings of Yājñavalkya and his interaction with female characters, the BU challenges the assumption that only married brahmin men can achieve selfhood and immortality. Significantly, this anticipates the Buddhist critique of Brahmanism which also attempts to forge relationships with kings based on philosophy but which takes the critique of the householder even further.

Despite the competing agendas of the BU and CU, both Upaniṣads employ the dialogue form to present their teachings. In both texts, the dialogue form is used to critique the Vedic sacrificial paradigm, to set up new ideals for brahmins and to connect these new ideals to specific doctrines and practices. Indeed, as much as any particular doctrine, the use of the dialogue is one of the most important legacies of the Upaniṣads in relation to subsequent Indian literature. Most generally, the dialogue form itself characterises philosophy as a social practice. Although the Upaniṣads are sometimes represented as the abstract insights of renunciates, the texts depict philosophy as an interactive process. In the Upaniṣads, philosophy is something that is achieved through discussion and debate, confrontation and negotiation. Despite emphasising knowledge about individual selves, this knowledge can only be achieved through dialogue with others.

Furthermore, the dialogue form focuses attention on a number of specific individuals, many of whom were already authoritative figures in Vedic literature. Characters like Śaṇḍilya, Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya were already known as

famous priests and textual composers, but the Upaniṣadic dialogues further develop their personalities, creating legends of ideal teachers and court priests. Thus, these stories not only use the names of these individuals to authorise specific teachings, but they also use the narratives to portray these individuals as leading a specific kind of life. In this way, the Upaniṣadic portrayals of these characters are similar to hagiographies, as they anchor religio-philosophical claims to a specific way of leading one's life. Whereas Satyakāma lives the life of a teacher and married householder, Yājñavalkya represents a challenge to this ideal as the priest who debates in the court and leaves his household without any male heirs. Both Satyakāma and Yājñavalkya embody their teachings, their different stories offering two distinct models of how to be a brahmin.

These features of the dialogues not only help us understand doctrines about the self, but they also can be instrumental in exploring how the Upaniṣads have influenced subsequent Indian texts. Many scholars have noted that the Upaniṣads have influenced early Buddhism. Yet, similar to how Upaniṣadic philosophy has been characterised in general, the influence of the Upaniṣads on early Buddhism has been described as taking place in the hermetically sealed realm of ideas. Significantly, however, the early Buddhist texts, like the Upaniṣads, use both narrative and dialogue to present the message of the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, there are a number of specific literary tropes and narrative situations that are quite similar. Both Yājñavalkya and the Buddha leave a life of riches that is associated with both the court and household for a life of renunciation. Also, the Buddha, like Yājñavalkya, debates against several opponents in the presence of the king. Whereas all of Yājñavalkya's opponents represent different Vedic schools, the Buddha's opponents represent rival religio-philosophical movements. These similarities suggest that one of the major influences

of the Upaniṣads on the early Buddhist texts is the mode of presentation. Both textual traditions present philosophical ideas in the form of a dialogue, as well as attach teachings to specific individuals in particular moments in space and time.

Similarly the Upaniṣads have had an important influence on subsequent Brahmanical literature. Knowledge continues to be portrayed as both elusive and dangerous, and the reluctant teacher and eager student remain as standard tropes. In particular, the dialogue form continues to be the most common mode of presentation for religio-philosophical ideas. Not only is the Bhagavad Gītā presented as a conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, but even texts like the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas are framed within a dialogue. We hope to explore the function and significance of the dialogue form in these texts, especially the Mahābhārata, in further research.

## ABBREVIATIONS:

ĀĀ	Aitareya Āraṇyaka
AB	Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
AU	Aitareya Upaniṣad
AV	Atharva Veda
BhG	Bhagavad Gītā
BU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
ĪU	Īśā Upaniṣad
JB	Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa
JUB	Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa
KaU	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
KeU	Kena Upaniṣad
KsU	Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad
MaU	Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
MBh	Mahābhārata
MtU	Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad
MuU	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
PU	Praśna Upaniṣad
RV	Rg Veda
ŚĀ	Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
ŚU	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
TĀ	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka
TB	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad

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