

The Character of the Self in Ancient India

PRIESTS, KINGS, AND WOMEN
IN THE EARLY UPANIṢADS



Brian Black

The Character of the Self in Ancient India

SUNY Series in Hindu Studies

Wendy Doniger, editor

The Character of the Self in Ancient India

Priest, Kings, and Women in the Early Upaniṣads

Brian Black

State University of New York Press

Cover art: *Kedara Ragini*, artist unknown, from the Manley Ragamala folio, The British Museum. Used by permission of the British Museum.

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2007 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production, Judith Block
Marketing, Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Black, Brian, 1970–

The character of the self in ancient India : priests, kings, and women in the early Upanisads / Brian Black.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in Hindu studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7013-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Upanishads—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Hindu literature, Sanskrit—History and criticism. 3. Character in literature. 4. Self in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

BL1124.57.B63 2007

294.5'9218—dc22

2006013430

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In memory of my father, Jerry Black,
my most inspirational dialogical companion

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
INTRODUCTION	1
Opening statement	1
What are the Upaniṣads?	3
The self, life, death, and immortality	7
The historical and social context	12
Characterizing the self	16
Literary characters	19
The social conditions of knowledge	22
Mystery or mystique: The character of knowledge	24
CHAPTER ONE	
Teachers and students: The emergence of teaching as an object of discourse	29
Introduction	29
Śāṇḍilya and the teaching of <i>ātman</i> and <i>brahman</i>	30
Śāṇḍilya: From ritualist to teacher	33
Uddālaka Āruṇi and the teaching of <i>tat tvam asi</i>	36
Uddālaka and Śvetaketu: Acting out the <i>upanayana</i>	38
Indra as the persistent student	41
Nārada and Sanatkumāra: Knowledge of <i>ātman</i> as more important than the Vedas	44
Naciketas and the initiation of an Upanishadic brahmin	46
The graduation of a brahmin student in the <i>Taittirīya</i> <i>Upaniṣad</i>	50
Satyakāma and the beginnings of a brahmin hagiography	53
Conclusion	57

CHAPTER TWO

Debates between brahmins: The competitive dynamics of the <i>brahmodya</i>	59
Introduction	59
The <i>brahmodya</i> and the sacrifice	60
Uddālaka Āruṇi and the <i>brahmodya</i> in the <i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>	63
Yājñavalkya and the philosophical tournament	67
Yājñavalkya's interlocutors: The social and political implications of debate	70
Yājñavalkya and the tactics of debate	74
Losing face or losing one's head? The motif of head shattering	80
Upanishadic teachings and material wealth	88
Yājñavalkya and renunciation	92
The life story of Yājñavalkya	96
Conclusion	98

CHAPTER THREE

Kings and brahmins: The political dimensions of the Upaniṣads	101
Introduction	101
The myth of <i>kṣatriya</i> authorship	103
Janaka and Yājñavalkya: Negotiating the brahmin's position in the court	105
Janaka and Yājñavalkya in the <i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>	110
Kings as teachers: Aśvapati teaches a group of brahmin householders	112
Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu: Instructions for how to seek patronage	114
Conflicting agendas for how kings should teach brahmins	117
Upanishadic knowledge as a political discourse	119
The battle of the <i>prāṇās</i> as a political metaphor	121
Pravāhaṇa and the teaching of the five fires	124
Conclusion	129

CHAPTER FOUR

Brahmins and women: Subjectivity and gender construction in the Upaniṣads	133
Introduction	133
The gender of the self: <i>Ātman</i> and the male body	135
The self, virility, and immortality	141

Yājñavalkya and Satyakāma: Competing ideals of male subjectivity	145
The myth of recovering an authentic female voice	148
Gārgī: The debating tactics of a female philosopher	150
Women and <i>gandharvas</i> : The lack of authority for female speakers	156
The ambiguities of Satyakāma's mother and wife	158
Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī: Knowledge of <i>ātman</i> versus <i>strīprajñā</i>	162
Conclusion	167
CONCLUSION	169
NOTES	175
GLOSSARY	197
BIBLIOGRAPHY	201
INDEX	211

This page intentionally left blank.

Acknowledgments

One of the fundamental arguments of this book is that philosophy, as well as 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 book. This work has emerged out of the conversations, discussions, debates, and arguments I have had with my supervisors, teachers, colleagues, students, friends, and family members during the past several years.

I would first like to thank my father, who passed away before this book was completed. I dedicate this work to him.

I would also like to thank my doctoral supervisors, Ted Proferes and Daud Ali, both of whom offered incisive comments and invaluable suggestions to earlier drafts of this work. I also thank my examiners, Julius Lipner and Cosimo Zene, both of whom offered extremely important feedback that has assisted me in transforming my doctoral thesis into this book.

In addition to my supervisors, my colleague Simon Brodbeck has been particularly helpful by providing me with detailed written responses to an earlier draft.

A number of people in the Department of the Study of Religions at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) have been significant sources of help, inspiration, and support. In particular I would like to mention Peter Flügel, Paul Gifford, Sian Hawthorne, Douglas Osto, Alexander Piatigorsky, Vena Ramphal, Tadeusz Skorupski, Paul-François Tremlett, Simon Weightman, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim. I would like to offer special thanks to the late Julia Leslie for her enthusiastic encouragement. I am also grateful to my students at SOAS and Birkbeck, whose questions and insights contributed greatly to this work.

I am deeply indebted to Pushpa Kale for reading the Upaniṣads with me in Sanskrit while I was studying for an academic year in

Pune. A number of other people were welcoming and supportive during that year: Saroja Bhate, M. A. Mehendale, Steven Lindquist, Jane Hobson, and Laurie Patton.

I would never have been interested in the Upaniṣads in the first place if I had not spent a formative year of my life in India in 1991–92 with the University of California Education Abroad Program. I am grateful to Gerald Larson who organized this program and who was the supervisor for my first paper on Indian philosophy. And I would like to give a special thanks to my dearest friends, with whom I had the pleasure of sharing this wonderful experience: Suanne Buggy, Lawrence Manzo, Jed Olson, Jasmine Sharma, and Joseph Sorrentino. Thanks to them for being there when it all started, and their love and support ever since.

I am indebted to Ilona Schäfer and Nicole Wolf, and to Susan Clark for reading an earlier draft. I would like to offer a special thanks to my dear friend Nakissa Etemad for proofreading a recent draft and for offering feedback as a “first reader.”

I thank Wendy Doniger, Nancy Ellegate, Judith Block, Marilyn Semerad, and the staff at SUNY for all their help and support during the publication process; and I thank Sona Datta for suggesting the cover art and the British Museum for kindly lending permission to use it.

Finally, and most of all, I thank my family: my wife, Yulia; my son, Harrison; and my mother, Mary. Writing this book would not have been possible without their unceasing love, support, and encouragement.

Abbreviations

AĀ	Aitareya Āraṇyaka
AU	Aitareya Upaniṣad
BU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
JB	Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa
JUB	Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa
KaU	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
KṣU	Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad
MDS	Mānava Dharmaśāstra
ṚV	Ṛgveda
ŚĀ	Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
ŚU	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
TĀ	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad

This page intentionally left blank.

Introduction

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 Upanishadic students. Sanatkumāra, however, demands to know his educational background before taking on Nārada as his pupil. Nārada responds:

Sir, I know the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Atharvaṇa* as the fourth, the history and legend (*itihāsa purāṇa*) as the fifth Veda, the grammar, ancestral rites, mathematics, fortune telling, treasure-finding, the dialogues, the narrow path, the knowledge of the gods, the knowledge of brahmins, the knowledge of the spirits, the knowledge of *kṣatriyas*, astrology, and the knowledge about serpent beings. So I am, sir, a knower of the *mantras*, but not a knower of the self (*ātman*). (7.1.2–3)¹

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 recognizes that to be truly knowledgeable he must learn about the self (*ātman*). As we will see in this book, 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.

The Upanishadic orientation towards the self marks a significant transformation in relation to previous Vedic literature, which primarily focuses on the description and meaning of ritual actions. Indeed, this shift has been recognized by the Indian tradition, as exemplified in the traditional Vedānta division of the Vedas into *karmakāṇḍa* and *jñānakāṇḍa*.

According to this classification, the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas are considered *karmakāṇḍa* as they are the sections of the Veda that deal with 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 change in orientation from the ritual texts to the Upaniṣads. Romila Thapar, for example, describes the emergence of the Upanishadic material as a paradigm shift in the constitution of knowledge in ancient India, observing that “the 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” (1993, 307). Modern translators of the Upaniṣads, including Max Müller ([1879–84] 2000), Paul Deussen ([1897] 2004), Robert Ernest Hume ([1921] 1975), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan ([1953] 1992), Patrick Olivelle (1996), and Valerie Roebuck (2003), have all recognized this philosophical orientation of the Upaniṣads, especially in discussions relating to the self.²

Similarly, this book 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.³ These sections use narrative to introduce teachings about the self (*ātman*), and related ideas such as the bodily winds (*prāṇās*), and the knowledge of the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*). I will demonstrate that these narrative sections are not merely literary ornaments, but are integral to an understanding of the philosophical claims of the texts. In fact, the paradigm shift noted by other scholars does not pertain merely to a change in the content of the Vedic texts, but also, as I will argue, is marked by innovations in the style and structure of the texts. As such, much of what makes the Upaniṣads unique in relation to previous material is the literary presentation of the texts themselves.

As in the dialogues of Plato, in the Upaniṣads philosophical claims are often introduced in the form of a conversation, thereby presenting philosophical ideas within the context of specific individuals and social situations. The dialogues tell us who is speaking, to whom, where, under what conditions, and what is at stake in the discussions. When we pay attention to these details, we see that the narratives not only contextualize the teachings, but also characterize the knowledge, and outline how and by whom these teachings should be practiced in the social world. While the teachings emphasize the *ātman*, the dialogues reinforce this focus on the individual by presenting us with specific

selves, the literary characters. In this way, the distinct characters and how they achieve selfhood are an integral part of the Upanishadic discourses about the self. As such, the Upanishadic notion of self is not merely a philosophical insight, but a way of being in the world.

WHAT ARE THE UPANIṢADS?

The Upaniṣads are some of the most well-known and well-appreciated philosophical texts in the world. In the modern era a number of intellectuals from Europe and India not only have recognized their profundity, but also have developed a personal affinity for these texts. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer viewed the Upaniṣads as “the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; [they have] been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death” ([1851] 1974: 397). In the preface to his translation of the Upaniṣads, which constitutes the first installment to the Sacred Books of the East series, Max Müller proclaimed: “My real love for Sanskrit literature was first kindled by the Upanishads” (1879–84, lxv). Vivekananda, one of the first Indian reformers to relate his reading of the Upaniṣads with the nationalist movement, declared before an audience in Madras: “The truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand” ([1922] 1973, 225). Similarly, Radhakrishnan connected the Upaniṣads to a national Indian identity: “For us Indians, a study of the Upaniṣads is essential, if we are to preserve our national being and character. To discover the main lines of our traditional life, we must turn to our classics, the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Dhamma-pada*” ([1953] 1992, 9). As we can see from these quotations, the Upaniṣads have made a personal impact on Indian and Western scholars alike, inspiring distinct interpretations among different audiences. Before describing my own approach and the structure of this book in more detail, let us first familiarize ourselves with 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. The oldest parts of the Vedas are the Saṃhitas, followed by the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, and then the Upaniṣads. In addition to the four types of Vedic text, there are four different collections or branches (*śākhā*) of Vedic material: the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajurveda* (consisting of two sub-branches: the Black *Yajurveda* and White *Yajurveda*), the *Sāmaveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*. In this book we will

concentrate on the Upaniṣads that constitute part of the first three of these four branches of the Vedas. The dates of the Upaniṣads—as well as the other sections of the Vedas—continue to be contested, yet most scholars estimate that they were composed between 700 and 300 BCE (see Olivelle 1996, xxxvi–xxxvii; Roebuck 2003, xxiv–xxvi).⁴ It is important to point out, however, that there are hundreds of texts that are known as Upaniṣads, because texts that called themselves by this name continued to be composed long after the Vedic corpus was closed. After the Vedic period, a number of devotional texts have referred to themselves as Upaniṣads, with the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.78: *śrīmadbhagavad-gītā upaniṣadaḥ*) as the most famous example. Additionally, there is a Muslim devotional text composed during the Mughal period called the *Allopaniṣad*.

A number of scholars claim that the Vedic Upaniṣads mark the birth of philosophy in ancient India.⁵ There are, of course, potential problems with this claim because the earlier Vedic texts also contain material that could be considered philosophical, and contention surrounds the word ‘philosophy’ itself as not appropriate for the Indian context.⁶ Despite these hesitations, it seems fair to say that the Upaniṣads occupy a similar place within the Indian tradition as the writings of the pre-Socratic philosophers do in the history of Western philosophy. Like the pre-Socratics, the Upaniṣads mark the beginning of a reasoned enquiry into a number of perennial philosophical questions concerning the nature of being, 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. In this way, the Upaniṣads establish a set of questions and provide a terminology for addressing these questions that would remain influential throughout the subsequent Indian textual tradition. This book, like so many others that engage the Upaniṣads, assumes their status as the birth of philosophy in ancient India. However, rather than focus on the philosophy as such, we will pay particular attention to how the Upaniṣads present their ideas.

Our primary focus will be on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, and the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, all of which are considered to be the early Upaniṣads, composed sometime before the time of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, most probably between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. These five early Upaniṣads are composed in prose, as opposed to the post-Buddhist Upaniṣads, which are presented in verse form. The later Vedic Upaniṣads, which would include the *Kena Upaniṣad*, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, represent a fur-

ther shift in philosophical orientation.⁷ It is important to distinguish the early Upaniṣads from these later texts, because a number of important ideas generally assumed to be representative of the Upaniṣads as a whole—such as *saṃsāra* (cycle of life, death, and rebirth), *mokṣa* (final liberation), and *yoga*—are only developed in the later texts.

As our focus is on the literary presentation of ideas, we will concern ourselves primarily with the sections of the early Upaniṣads that contain narratives and dialogues. We will also be looking closely at some other sections, including speculations about the Vedic sacrifice, creation myths, genealogies of teachers and students, magical formulas, and procreation rites, insofar as this material helps contextualize the stories and dialogues. As will become clear, the early Upaniṣads consist of a diverse set of material, much of which either existed independently or formed parts of other texts before being collected in one of the Upaniṣads.

We will also consider sections from the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas, particularly the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, as they contain some of the initial examples of the kinds of narratives that appear in the Upaniṣads, and the later portions of these texts are 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 transmitted as material entirely embedded within the Āraṇyakas. For example, in the textual tradition of the *Ṛgveda*, the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* appears within the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*.⁸ In the school of the Black *Yajurveda*, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* consists of a portion of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*.⁹ In the White *Yajurveda*, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka 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 to the meaning of ritual actions, rather than the literal descriptions of how to perform the ritual. The Āraṇyakas, for example, have a number of discourses that are considered secret and equivalent to ritual performance.¹⁰ A. B. Keith argues that this knowledge does not replace ritual activity, but rather consists of teachings that are connected to it:

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. ([1909] 1995, 15–16)

Similarly, in a number of dialogues in the Upaniṣads, knowledge does not replace ritual, as it seems likely that rituals, including large-scale Vedic sacrifices, continued to be performed. Nevertheless, in the Upaniṣads a number of teachings are considered independent from traditional rituals and in many cases they are cast as superior to them. Additionally, the emphasis on secret or hidden knowledge that is established in the Brāhmaṇas and the Āraṇyakas continues throughout the early Upaniṣads, with several discourses claiming that the gods love what is secret (*paro' kṣakāmā hi devāḥ*) (ŚB 6.1.1.1–15; BU 4.2.2; AU 1.3.14).

Indeed, the notion of esoteric knowledge is closely intertwined with the meaning of the term *upaniṣad*. According to tradition the significance of the word is derived from the sum of its parts: *upa* (near) + *ni* (down) + *sad* (to sit), meaning “to sit down near.” This rendering of the term conjures up the image of the student sitting by the feet of the teacher. Although this is undoubtedly what the word has come to mean, scholars have challenged this as the original connotation on the grounds that this is not how the word is employed in its initial occurrences, or indeed anywhere in the texts that we now call the Upaniṣads. Rather than defining the word by its etymology, scholars have noticed that in its earliest textual contexts, *upaniṣad* is used to describe a connection between things, often presented in a hierarchical relationship. According to Harry Falk (1986), in the Brāhmaṇas, *upaniṣad* refers to the dominant power in a chain of dependency in which the *upaniṣad* is the final component in a list, or the final teaching that is the foundation for everything else. As Joel Brereton explains, “The purpose of arranging things in such a progression is finally to identify the dominant reality behind an object” (1990, 124–25). As such, an *upaniṣad* is not immediate or transparent, but rather remains concealed and obscure. Patrick Olivelle suggests that due to the hidden nature of an *upaniṣad* as the connecting power in a hierarchy, it “came to mean a secret, especially secret knowledge or doctrine. It is probably as an extension of this meaning that the term came finally to be used with reference to entire texts containing such secret doctrines, that is, our Upaniṣads” (1996, liii). According to Roebuck, this notion of an esoteric teaching returns us to a meaning of *upaniṣad*

that focuses on teacher and student: “An Upaniṣad recounts one or more sessions of teaching, often setting each within the story of how it came to be taught” (2003, xv). As we will see, the connotation of secrecy that is conjured up by the word *upaniṣad*, as well as other narrative details, is a central feature of the texts. However, this book will concentrate more on the formal features of secrecy rather than claiming to uncover the secrets themselves.

THE SELF, LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY

This book will focus primarily on the teachings that are highlighted by the dialogues in the Upaniṣads, and those that are generally characterized 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.’ The word continued to be used as a pronoun, but by the time of the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, *ātman* also became a philosophical term that could be associated with a wide range of meanings including body and soul, and could sometimes refer to the ontological principle underlying all reality. Although there are a number of distinct and contradictory definitions of *ātman*, throughout the Upaniṣads, teachings 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 myths in 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* (10.90), 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 incomplete, and only when his body is reassembled does creation really begin. In the Brāhmaṇas, the mythology of Puruṣa becomes extended to the creator god Prajāpati.¹¹ Prajāpati creates the world from his own corporality and his creation is considered incomplete, as his creatures are without breath, suffering from hunger or lack of food, without firm foundation, or without name or form.¹² As in the *Puruṣasūkta*, creation is imagined in terms of restoring and re-ordering rather than making something from nothing (ŚB 10.4.2.3).

One of the functions of the Vedic sacrifice was to complete the creation process begun by Prajāpati. Throughout this mythology the universe not only is made from a primordial male body, but also shares with 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 *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (1.1), for example, begins with a creation myth in which *ātman* creates the universe from the body of Puruṣa.¹³ As 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 man) 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* is cast as a creator god who creates the universe by means of sacrificing, dismembering, and reconstructing a body.

Although in this passage *ātman* assumes the mythological status of Puruṣa and Prajāpati, most of the teachings concerning *ātman* represent a different set of concerns from those found in the ritual discourse. Rather than assume a correspondence between the human body and the universe, many teachings in 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" (1990, 119). Several sections describe *ātman* as a life force or something that keeps the body alive. For example, the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (2.3.2) describes *ātman* as taking different forms in different living beings. 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 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1–16) Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches that *ātman* is the finest essence in all living beings.

In chapter 1 we will look at how different Upanishadic teachers have different teachings about *ātman*. Here, however, it is important to point out that despite the differences, there are some general tendencies. Most of these teachings assume that *ātman* is immortal, that *ātman* dwells within the body when it is alive, and in one way or another that *ātman* is responsible for the body being alive. *Ātman* does not die when the body dies, but rather finds a dwelling place in another body.

As Yājñavalkya, one of the most prominent figures in the Upaniṣads, explains, “Just as a caterpillar, having reached the end of a blade of grass, as it takes another step, draws itself together. So the self (*ātman*), having thrown down the body and having dispelled ignorance, in taking another step, draws itself together” (BU 4.4.3).¹⁴ As the *ātman* is immortal, it is also characterized as permanent and unchanging.

Closely related to these discussions about *ātman* are discourses about *prāṇa*. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.2.1), for example, describes the *ātman* as consisting of *prāṇa*, while in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.1.20) King Ajātaśatru teaches that the *ātman* and the *prāṇās* have an interdependent relationship. Indeed, these teachings explain that the *ātman*, as a living organism, cannot exist without *prāṇa*. As H. W. Bodewitz suggests, generally *prāṇa* refers to breath and can mean both exhalation and life-breath (1973, 22).

It is difficult to define *prāṇa* because it means different things in different contexts. In its plural form, the *prāṇās* refer to either the bodily winds or to the five vital functions (breath, sight, hearing, speech, and mind).¹⁵ Although these distinctly different categories are both called *prāṇās*, in its singular form, *prāṇa* appears in both groups, retaining its connection to breath. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.5.21) explains that because the *prāṇa* is superior, the other vital functions take on the name collectively. Importantly, the composers of the Upaniṣads did not associate the life breaths of the human body with the lungs, but rather the breaths are usually described in terms of how they move and where they operate within the body. For example, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.3.19) describes the *prāṇās* as the essence (*rasa*) of the bodily parts (*aṅga*), articulating the close connection between the breaths and the material body. In another passage, the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* (3.2) associates life with *prāṇa*, stating that as long as *prāṇa* remains within the body, the body remains alive.

In the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (2.1.4) we see one of the earliest appearances of a recurring myth about the competition between *prāṇa* and the other vital functions. There are a number of variations of this myth.¹⁶ Whatever the variations, 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 the body is restored to life.

The various versions of the *prāṇa* myth assume that knowledge of how the body works and what is responsible for life can contribute