

Teachers and Students

The Emergence of Teaching as an Object of Discourse

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 such as Śāṅḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi, as well as students such as Śvetaketu and Naciketas. Many of these individuals first appear in the late Brāhmaṇas merely as names mentioned 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, indicating that sacrificial knowledge begins to be authorized through a connection to specific individuals. By the time of the Upaniṣads, these individuals not only appear as authoritative names but also are represented as literary characters in extended narrative scenes.

In addition to describing a number of specific literary personae, 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 characterized by their honesty and eagerness to learn, addressing the teacher in respectful ways and offering to work for them.¹ Importantly, these character traits reflect the actions of teachers and students as described in the *upanayana*, the initiation ceremony of a brahmin student, as it is presented in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. By looking at the dialogues alongside the *upanayana*, I 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 behavior based on the activity of teaching is important because the Upaniṣads introduce new criteria for achieving the status of brahmin. A number of dialogues are critical of the *brahmabandhu*, the type of brahmin who is a brahmin only because of birth, and maintain that brahmins must also establish their credentials through knowledge and education. As such, the dialogues between teachers and students place more importance on the identity of one's teacher than on the identity of one's father.

One of the features that all of these dialogues have in common is that teachers instruct their students in discourses about the self. Different teachers reveal different understandings of *ātman*, but all present knowledge about the self as a fundamental part of their teachings. Śāṅḍilya 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 cognizing. 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 that is fundamental to the education of an Upanishadic student.

ŚĀṆḌILYA AND THE TEACHING OF ĀTMAN AND BRAHMAN

Śāṅḍilya is an appropriate character to begin our discussion with because he appears in some of the earliest narrative scenes in the Brāhmaṇas and is known as the composer of books six through ten of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. In the early Upaniṣads, Śāṅḍilya appears four times, yet does not feature in any dialogues. He is mentioned in all three genealogical lists in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, and in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* he is named as the teacher of a discourse about *ātman* and *brahman*.² This teaching, that the self is equivalent to the underlying principle of reality, is one of the most important legacies of the early Upaniṣads.

Śāṅḍilya's teaching (CU 3.14.1–4) begins with *brahman*, stating that it is the entire world, and that what happens to people at the time of death is in accordance with their resolve in this world. He then turns his attention to *ātman*, which he describes in a number of different ways. He speaks of *ātman* as made of mind (*manas*), manifested in

physical form as the *prāṇās*, and as dwelling within the heart (*hṛdaya*). Throughout his teaching, Śāṅḍilya describes *ātman* as something that defies definition and categorization: it is both smaller than a mustard seed and larger than all the worlds put together, smaller than a grain of rice, yet larger than the earth. As Brereton explains, Śāṅḍilya teaches about the extremes of reality through his use of paradox: “The self is the most intimate part of a person, the very center 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” (1990, 130).

After describing *ātman* in various ways, Śāṅḍilya then claims that *ātman* captured this whole world. This return to the subject of the whole world comes just before equating *ātman* with *brahman*. Knowledge of this equation, according to Śāṅḍilya, leads one to overcome death: “This self (*ātman*) of mine within the heart is *brahman*. On departing from here, I will enter into him” (3.14.4).³ Brereton explains that the equivalence between *ātman* and *brahman* emphasizes 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” (1990, 118).

The equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is the most well-known teaching in the Upaniṣads and is clearly the central message of Śāṅḍilya’s instruction. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this understanding of *ātman* is not shared by a number of other teachers. In most of the teachings that we will examine in this chapter the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is not emphasized, or even mentioned. For example, Uddālaka Āruṇi, who imparts some of the most influential teachings of *ātman*, never mentions *brahman*.⁴ Additionally, in several teachings where *ātman* is explicitly associated with *brahman*, the term *brahman* appears in a list with a number of other important terms. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.6.3), for example, *ātman* is equated with the *uktha* (verses of the *Ṛgveda*), with the *sāman* (chants of the *Sāmaveda*) and with *brahman*.⁵ A similar type of list appears in the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (3.3), which equates *ātman* with *brahman*, Indra, Prajāpati, all the *devas* (gods), the five *mahābhūtas* (gross elements), and other things. These sections do not emphasize a specific correlation between *ātman* and *brahman*, but list *brahman* in the same way as they mention a number of other central ideas, such as Prajāpati and the *devas*, thus highlighting the importance of *ātman*.

It is also significant that there are many meanings of *brahman* throughout the Upaniṣads.⁶ As Olivelle points out, “Brahman may mean a ‘formulation of truth,’ the Veda or the ultimate and basic essence of the cosmos” (1996, lvi).⁷ As such, to identify something with *brahman* can be a way of bestowing a particular teaching with special significance. In this way, as Brereton suggests, 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” (1990, 118).

It is not my intention to devalue the profundity of Śāṅḍilya’s teaching, but rather to show that this is not the only teaching, nor the only understanding of *ātman*, contained in the Upaniṣads. According to the *Brahma Sūtra* and later Vedānta philosophers, the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* is the fundamental message of all the Upaniṣads. Additionally, a number of modern translators of the Upaniṣads, including Deussen, Hume, and Radhakrishnan, consider this the most important idea put forth by 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*” ([1919] 2000, 38). Hume characterizes the identification of *ātman* and *brahman* as a discovery that was waiting to happen since the early Vedic period, maintaining 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” ([1921] 1975, 31).⁸

Despite the fact that recent scholarship has expanded its considerations of the Upaniṣads to take into account their numerous and sometimes contradictory teachings, the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* remains the central doctrine associated with the texts. J. C. Heesterman, for example, sees the merging of these two ideas as already expected by the 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” (1993, 220). Brian Smith, in his studies of ritual ontology, also describes the *ātman/brahman* 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 Upanisads . . . and its ultimate product, the equation of the microcosm (*ātman*) and macrocosm (*brahman*). (1994, 12)

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, in fact, been overemphasized, but more importantly, the 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. (1996, lvi)⁹

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 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” ([1921] 1975, 70). 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.

ŚĀṄḌĪLYA: FROM RITUALIST TO TEACHER

One of the most fundamental aspects of the teaching of *ātman/brahman* is that it emphasizes Śāṅḍilya as its proponent. In addition to teaching the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman* in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, Śāṅḍilya also appears as the teacher of a similar discourse in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.6.3.2). Thus, on the two occasions when this teaching is presented in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads,

Śāṅḍilya appears as the teacher. This represents an important trend in Vedic literature, as the truth of a teaching 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 emphasize 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 which the texts have been preserved, that strict modes of speech and behavior accompanied this transmission of knowledge.¹⁰ 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 that glorify brahmins as teachers and that 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 the 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" (1994, 311).

Importantly, Śāṅḍilya 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 teaching a particular student during a specific moment of instruction. In this way, 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 cited as an expert about ritual procedure. For example, at the end of the ninth book of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (9.5.2.15–6), Śāṅḍilya is quoted about the ontological connection between the body of the sacrificer and the body of the sacrifice. Also, in a passage about the sacrificial bricks (*chandasya*), Śāṅḍilya's authority is invoked (7.5.2.43). In these cases, simply his name is mentioned and his status as a legendary figure is employed to give credence to this particular point of ritual action.

However, in a number of other passages, Śaṅḍilya is depicted in specific dialogical situations with students. Although these short exchanges are not the full dialogues that we see in the Upaniṣads, they are significant because they begin to show an interest in recounting the transmission of knowledge and in investing the act of teaching with a certain authority. For example, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Śaṅḍilya is quoted as an authority on building the fire altar. On this occasion he is specifically named as a teacher, and he is depicted disputing with his student Sāptarathavāhani (10.1.4.10); on another occasion, Śaṅḍilya is described teaching the Kaṅkatīyas (ŚB 9.4.4.17). In these examples, not only is Śaṅḍilya named, but the narrative also gives us the identity of his students. Additionally, the text includes details about these distinct teaching encounters, telling us that at the end of his lesson to the Kaṅkatīyas, Śaṅḍilya “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 Śaṅḍilya 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. In these examples it is not merely the knowledge itself that is emphasized, but the process of teaching and the interaction between teacher and student.

These short episodes featuring Śaṅḍilya also show a tendency towards creating legends and stories about textual composers, emphasizing 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 teachings. According to Sāyaṇa, Mahidāsa authored the first three books of the *Aitareya Aranyaka*, as well as the entire *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*. Like Śaṅḍilya, Mahidāsa not only is ascribed authorship to these texts, but also is cited within these texts as the teacher of a number of discourses (AĀ 2.1.8; 2.3.7).¹¹ Keith points out that he is most likely not the real author of these texts, although he could have been their editor or compiler ([1909] 1995, 16). Nevertheless, both Mahidāsa and Śaṅḍilya represent the kind of brahmin character portrayed in the Upaniṣads and 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.¹²

By focusing on Śaṅḍilya 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. The *ātman/brahman* teaching is specifically associated with Śaṅḍilya, and along with a number of short dialogues in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, represents a focus on the authority of a specific individual, as well as an appeal to specific moments of instruction. In this context, Śaṅḍilya is one of several teachers who gives instructions about the self and who emphasizes the social practice of teaching.

UDDĀLAKA ĀRUṆI AND THE TEACHING OF *TAT TVAM ASI*

Uddālaka Āruṇi is another Upanishadic teacher known for his discourses on *ātman*. Whereas Śaṅḍilya teaches about the equivalence of *ātman* and *brahman*, Uddālaka describes *ātman* as the essence of life (CU 6.1–16). 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.¹³ 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: “Whatever they are in this world, a tiger, a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a fly, a gnat, or a mosquito, they all become that” (CU 6.9.3, 6.10.2).¹⁴

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,” with philosophers such as Śaṅkara taking *tat tvam asi* to refer to the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*. As mentioned above, however, Uddālaka does not once use the word *brahman*. Furthermore, Brereton (1986) has cast doubt on the traditional rendering of this phrase, arguing that in Vedic grammar the pronoun *tat* (that) is neuter, and therefore cannot correspond with the masculine pronoun *tvam* (you). Thus, according to Brereton, if “you are that” was the intended meaning, then the passage should read *sa tvam asi*.¹⁵ He concludes that *tat tvam asi* is better rendered as “that is how you are.” 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 essence. Accordingly, Uddālaka teaches that *ātman* is the essential life

force in all living beings. At the end of his instruction, as Brereton explains, "Uddālaka personalizes the teaching. Śvetaketu should look upon himself in the same way. He, like the tree and the whole world, is pervaded by this essence, which is his final reality and true self" (1986, 109).

Crucially, this dialogue not only emphasizes what Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches, but also brings attention to his method of instruction. Throughout his lesson to Śvetaketu, Uddālaka points to observable phenomena and sets up repeatable experiments for the sake of leading Śvetaketu to a proper understanding. In order to show the subtlety of *ātman*, he instructs Śvetaketu to cut a banyan fruit and then to cut a seed within the fruit. When he has cut the seed, Śvetaketu proclaims that he cannot see anything inside it. Yet Uddālaka likens the fine essence within the seed that cannot even be seen to *ātman*. In order to show how *ātman* permeates everything but cannot be seen, he asks Śvetaketu to put a chunk of salt in water. A day later, Śvetaketu 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 that, like salt in water, *ātman* permeates his entire body despite the fact that it is not immediately observable to the senses. In other examples, Uddālaka instructs his son about *ātman* by means of comparison with natural processes such as bees making honey, rivers flowing towards an ocean, and sap flowing out of a tree.¹⁶

Additionally, at one point Uddālaka instructs his son to refrain from eating for fifteen days. After this period he asks Śvetaketu to recite the verses from the *Rgveda*, the formulas from the *Yajurveda*, and the chants from the *Sāmaveda*. However, because he had fasted for fifteen days, Śvetaketu cannot remember any of this material. 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, then you will understand me" (CU 6.7.3). As opposed to traditional Vedic knowledge that is based upon the ontological connections that are made through ritual action, here Uddālaka explains the physiological connection between nourishment and memory.¹⁷ 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 the means for attaining knowledge. As Thapar points out, the Upaniṣads do not construct merely 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” (1994, 307). In this way, Uddālaka’s teaching is important not only for the philosophical claims he makes, but also for the methods he prescribes for acquiring knowledge.

UDDĀLAKA AND ŚVETAKETU:
ACTING OUT THE *UPANAYANA*

By far the most distinctive method for acquiring knowledge that is adopted throughout the Upanishadic dialogues, however, is the establishment of specific modes of address and behavior 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 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.5.4.1–18).¹⁸ The *upanayana* is the initiation ceremony through which one enters into the life of a Vedic student (*brahmacārin*). The first detailed description of the *upanayana* appears in the eleventh book of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. As we will see, 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 *brahmacārya* . . . let me be a *brahmacārin*.” 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 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.5.4.12) later explains that by laying his right hand on the student, the teacher becomes pregnant with him. After these invocations, the teacher proclaims, “You are a *brahmacārin*.” He then asks him to sip water, to do work, and to put fuel on the fire. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* account also describes a number of practices that are features of initiation in later literature: teaching the *Sāvitrī mantra*, giving the staff, the girdle, and garment to the student; and placing fuel on the fire.¹⁹

Walter 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 *brahmacārin* are of archaic origin” (1989, 111).²⁰ Whether this description of teaching represents

an older practice or not, it is significant that the *upanayana* is first described in the late Brāhmaṇas. As such, it is first presented as an object of discourse at the same time that dialogues between teachers and students begin to appear in the texts. Furthermore, the *upanayana* shares a number of details with these dialogues, together establishing the normative practices within which Upanishadic knowledge is learned.

The establishment of a proper code of behavior based on the activity of teaching is vital 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" (1993, 44). Similarly, the Upanishadic dialogues both outline particular modes of address and behavior, as well as connect these actions to specific teachings. Throughout the dialogues, the authority of knowledge is generated by the social practices of teaching.

The dialogue between Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu, for example, not only emphasizes 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 a *brahmanbandhu*, one who is a brahmin only because of birth (CU 6.1.1). Here, Uddālaka distinguishes between two kinds of brahmins: those who are brahmins merely because of their birth and those brahmins who earn their status by means of their knowledge. Śvetaketu, although already a brahmin by birth, is encouraged to receive a proper education, and thus become a true brahmin like his father and grandfather.

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. These details about the number of years of a *brahmacarya* education are shared by other passages in the Upaniṣads.²¹ 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 criticizes traditional Vedic learning. Śvetaketu, after finishing his studies, returns arrogant (*mahāmanas*) and proud (*stabdha*), thinking that he is learned (CU 6.1.2–3). However, Śvetaketu's education proves to be

incomplete, as he does not know his father's discourse about the rules of substitution. 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 Upanishadic teachings.

In this dialogue Uddālaka Āruṇi represents the Upanishadic teacher who is familiar with knowledge about *ātman*, and he is contrasted with the eminent (*bhagavantas*) 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. Rather, 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, an important feature of this encounter because it is different from how their pedagogical relationship appears in other contexts. In a dialogue that immediately precedes this one in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (CU 5.11–24), 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 characterized as knowledgeable, while Uddālaka Āruṇi is the ignorant and orthodox brahmin. We will examine this dialogue in more detail in chapter 3. In this discussion, however, it is noteworthy that this dialogue employs literary characters to present teachings about the self in contradistinction to traditional Vedic learning.

Nevertheless, this scene does not reject traditional Vedic knowledge completely, but rather suggests that Śvetaketu's teachers had lost touch with the teachings of Vedic antiquity. Indeed, Uddālaka connects his own teachings to the Vedic tradition when later in this dialogue he says that his discourse about the three appearances represents the knowledge of the great householders (*mahāśāla*) and great Vedic scholars (*mahāśrotṛiya*) of the past (CU 6.4.5). Thus, this dialogue rejects the authority of Śvetaketu's traditional teachers, while at the same time it authorizes Uddālaka's teaching by equating it with the Vedic tradition. This ambivalence is characteristic of the Upaniṣads in general, which firmly place themselves within the Vedic tradition, yet 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, with Yājñavalkya, Naciketas, and Satyakāma often representing the ideal Upanishadic brahmins, while characters such as Śvetaketu's teachers and Yājñavalkya's opponents

personify the traditional priests who are out of touch with the contemporary discourse.

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 the *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) is recast as a competition over knowledge of *ātman* (CU 8.7.2).²² This cosmic battle is repeated several times throughout the *Ṛgveda* and is a myth that continues in the Brāhmaṇas as well as in the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas.²³ 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*—the sacrificial drink and food of the gods—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 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* Indra and Virocana attempt to establish their supremacy over one another by means of mastering Upanishadic teachings. Significantly, Prajāpati, the god most associated with the ontology of the sacrifice, appears as the teacher of this new knowledge.²⁴ In this telling of the cosmic battle, knowledge of the *ātman* replaces the sacrifice as that which is considered most important to the *devas*. 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 *Ṛgveda* and the sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas, knowledge of *ātman* is directly linked to military and political power. The dialogue emphasizes this point by repeating that knowledge of *ātman* leads to obtaining all the worlds and fulfilling all desires (CU 8.7.2).

This dialogue also outlines a number of practices associated with the *upanayana*. When Indra and Virocana initially approach Prajāpati in order to learn about *ātman*, they arrive in the presence of their prospective teacher carrying firewood (CU 8.7.2). These two narrative details, the approach of the student and the offering of firewood, feature in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* account of the *upanayana*, and appear in a number of the teacher/student dialogues throughout the Upaniṣads. Together, these descriptions establish that it is up to students to seek out a teacher and that they 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 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.6.1), for example, describes Satyakāma working for his teacher by herding his cows, building a fire, and feeding the fire with wood. In the Upaniṣads

carrying firewood is the most common trope for a student who offers to gather fuel and tend the fires for his teacher.

Throughout his encounter with Prajāpati, Indra is cast as a model pupil who is persistent in his search for knowledge. This is emphasized as he continues to return to Prajāpati in search of the true knowledge of *ātman*. Typically, Upanishadic teachers do not part with knowledge easily, so students such as Indra have to show that they are willing to work hard and be patient for the rewards of learning. 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 what they wanted when they came to him in the first place (CU 8.7.3). This question represents the teacher's characteristic aloofness and the importance for students to remain persistent in their quest for knowledge. Similarly, as we will see, Yama is reluctant to teach Naciketas (KaU 1.12) and Raikva does not impart his knowledge initially to Jānaśruti (CU 4.1). This reluctance to teach, at least initially, is one of the most common traits of the Upanishadic teacher, and is also reminiscent of knowledge exchanges observed by Lindstrom during his anthropological work in the South Pacific: 'Knowers, rather than destroying all their secrets in some impressive flow of information, carefully time their revelations so that these last from conversation to conversation. Here, secret tellers may indicate to auditors that they are holding back the real truths of their knowledge, although they communicate enough to convince people of the existence of their secrets to make these conversationally conspicuous' (1990, 120). As Prajāpati delivers his teaching in 'carefully timed' increments, Indra has to prove that he is both sufficiently intelligent and eager to learn.

When Prajāpati finally gets around to giving his first 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 recognizes 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, because he realizes 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 further.

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 notices that Prajāpati has given him a false teaching. For a third time, Indra approaches Prajāpati, again carrying firewood and demanding further instruction. On 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 presentation of the self is not the true *ātman*, but rather is another false teaching that Prajāpati imparts to Indra. Yet once again Indra realizes that this is not the true *ātman* and he returns with firewood one more time finally to 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 101. In his concluding lesson 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 Śāṅḍilya and Uddālaka Āruṇi. Prajāpati describes *ātman* as the one who is aware behind the faculties of smell, sight, speech, hearing, and thinking. In this way, *ātman* is depicted as a consciousness that is the base of the faculties of sensing and cognizing. In order to make his point, Prajāpati first delivers a number of false teachings, which both represents potential rival positions and tests Indra's resolve as a student. Importantly, by challenging Indra's ability to distinguish the correct teaching from the false ones, 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 a valuable aspect of imparting false teachings is preparing students for these situations. In this way, Prajāpati's deceit is not conducted out of spite, but out of pedagogy; by not telling Indra what he knows, he leads Indra towards the truth, in this case towards knowledge of the self.

In this dialogue, as Indra is a model of how to be a good Upanishadic 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. J. N. Mohanty suggests that Virocana's understanding of *ātman* as the material body represents the point of view of the Lokāyatās (2000, 3–4).²⁵ Indeed, this understanding of *ātman* as the body (*dehātmaavāda*) 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 outside the Vedic tradition: 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* prepare a dead body with alms obtained by begging (*bhikṣa*), clothes (*vasana*), and adornments (*alaṅkāra*) (CU 8.8.5).²⁶ As in Uddālaka's teaching to Śvetaketu, this dialogue presents a situation in which an Upanishadic teaching is contrasted with rival positions and practices. Whereas Uddālaka's instruction is presented in contradistinction to traditional Vedic knowledge, Prajāpati's teaching of *ātman* is directly contrasted with a number of false doctrines of the self, some of which are explicitly non-Vedic.

NĀRADA AND SANATKUMĀRA: KNOWLEDGE OF ĀTMAN AS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE VEDAS

In a dialogue between Nārada and Sanatkumāra, knowledge of *ātman* is directly contrasted with more traditional Vedic knowledge (CU 7.1). This encounter, which we have mentioned briefly at the beginning of the introduction, features the ancient sage Nārada as the student and Sanatkumāra, one of the mind-born sons of Brahṁā, as the teacher. 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 Upanishadic teachings about the self. In addition to highlighting *ātman*, this dialogue also emphasizes several teaching practices that are mentioned in the *upanayana*, as well as in other dialogues. For example, Nārada is cast a persistent student, who, like Indra, 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, tell it to me" (CU 7.1–15). This is also a characteristic of Śvetaketu in his dialogue with his father Uddālaka Āruṇi, where he makes the same request nine different times (CU 6.5.1–6, 15.3). Although these refrains could be explained in terms of a literary convention, they also serve to characterize 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 are satisfied with the initial utterances of their teacher, they are in danger of returning home with a false teaching.

As Nārada is portrayed as a model student, Sanatkumāra is typical of a number of teachers throughout the Upaniṣads, for whom an important part of their etiquette 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 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 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 (CU 7.1.1). Indeed, there are other examples that illustrate these common features between the *upanayana* and the pedagogical dialogues. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.3.3.1) 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 (BU 6.2.1; CU 5.3.1). These situations indicate the close relationship between these dialogues and the *upanayana*, and 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, a vital 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 of being an *ativādin*, which throughout the Upaniṣads, refers to someone who debates well or "out-talks."²⁷ 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 (BU 3.9.19). Sanatkumāra, however, describes an *ativādin* positively and suggests that this is a crucial aspect of his teaching to Nārada. He instructs Nārada that one should openly admit to being an *ativādin*, saying that if someone accuses him of out-talking, he should admit to out-talking and not deny it (CU 7.15.4). Yet Sanatkumāra specifies that one should out-talk correctly by knowing how to speak with truth. As Roebuck explains, to out-talk is "a doubtful quality in one without knowledge, but proper in one with knowledge beyond the normal limits" (2003, 425n.). In this dialogue Sanatkumāra not only imparts to Nārada a teaching of *ātman*, but he also reinforces the procedure of the

upanayana and prepares Nārada for the crucial brahmin activity of debate.

NACIKETAS AND THE INITIATION OF AN UPANISHADIC 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.²⁸ This story, as it appears in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, is from an episode in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (3.11.8) in which Yama explains to Naciketas the origin of the sacrificial fire altar.²⁹ As such, it richly employs symbolism pertaining to the *agnicayana* (altar-building ritual). Not only is *naciketas* one of the names associated with the fire altar in the *agnicayana*,³⁰ but also Naciketa's father, Vājaśravas, appears in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* as performing and teaching about the *agnicayana* (10.5.5.1).

In addition to Naciketas and his father, Yama is also connected to the imagery surrounding the fire altar. One of the numerous correspondences discussed in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.5.2.1, 10.6.4.1) is the connection between the sun, the sacrificial altar, and the human body, with all three described as containing a *puruṣa* within them.³¹ The gold man, which is buried under the first layer of bricks of the *agnicayana* fire altar, is the *puruṣa* within the body of the fire corresponding with the *puruṣa* in the sun, and with 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" (ŚB 10.5.2.7 tr. Eggeling). Significantly, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states that "the man in yonder orb is no other than Death (Yama)" (ŚB 10.5.2.3 tr. Eggeling). Thus, the character of Yama not only is the personification of death, but also corresponds with the *puruṣa* within the sun.

In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Naciketas and Yama, who are already associated with aspects of the *agnicayana*, are presented as literary characters, thus shifting the emphasis away from the sacrifice itself, to 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, proclaiming that the heavenly fires abide in the secret place, that the true fire dwells in the cave of the heart (1.14).

The episode begins when Naciketas observes that his father is giving milked and barren animals as a sacrifice. After he reflects to

himself that his father's sacrifice is inadequate and not worthy of any rewards, 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 articulates another sharp criticism of sacrifice, with Naciketas observing that his father's sacrifice is not truly giving anything meaningful away. We see a similar critique of sacrifice in the story of Uṣasti Cākrāyaṇa (aka Uṣasta Cākrāyaṇa) (CU 1.10–11).³² 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. In both examples, the criticism is not that sacrifices should not be performed, but that they are not being practiced 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.³³

Indeed, Naciketas' entire encounter can be seen as a redefinition of sacrifice. Rather than offer milked and barren animals, Naciketas prompts his father into offering him in a ritual death before he is reborn again through the initiation ceremony. Similarly, James Helfer interprets 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" (1968, 367). 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, the sacrifice is not a literal offering, yet 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 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* states that what people usually call a sacrifice (*yajña*) is, in fact, the life of a celibate student (*brahmacarya*) (8.5.1). By means of a number of creative etymologies this passage goes on to connect several different aspects of the sacrifice with various dimensions of studentship.³⁴ In the case of Naciketas this metaphor is employed to present his sacrifice as favorable in contrast with his father's literal sacrifice, as he 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 corresponds to the duration of the *upanayana* as presented in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*: "By laying his right hand on (the pupil), the teacher becomes pregnant (with him): in the third (night) he is born as

a Brahmaṇa with the Sāvitrī" (11.5.4.12 tr. Eggeling).³⁵ Helfer's claim—that this period of three nights symbolizes a trial and consists of part of Naciketas' initiation—initially seems convincing, especially as it corresponds to other tests set by teachers in Upanishadic dialogues.³⁶ 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 the Upaniṣads.

This point is further suggested by the apparent *varṇa* (class) distinction between Naciketas and Yama. When Naciketas enters his house Yama is not there, and when Yama returns a voice warns him that he should serve Naciketas food and water to appease him (KaU 1.7). Helfer interprets Yama's offering of water as part of the initiation ceremony, invoking Mircea Eliade to suggest that water is part of the universal structure for initiation (1968, 357). Indeed, offering water to a student is part of the *upanayana* as described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. In this instance, however, it seems more likely that Yama offers Naciketas water in order to show him the proper hospitality as a brahmin guest. In other Upanishadic dialogues water is offered only when a *kṣatriya* is teaching a brahmin, suggesting that there is a *varṇa* difference between Yama and Naciketas. This is further indicated in the *Bṛhāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which lists both Yama and Mṛtyu as the gods of *kṣatriyas* (1.4.11). If this is the case, then the hospitality that Yama shows Naciketas, even when he is the one doing the teaching, is similar to a number of dialogues where a *kṣatriya* offers gifts to brahmins, even though the *kṣatriya* delivers the discourse.

If this story were about the initiation of a Vedic ritualist, as Helfer suggests, we might 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, as opposed to learning from a brahmin with specific connections to the *Yajurveda*, Naciketas is instructed by Yama—who is cast in a role similar to that of a *kṣatriya* teacher—and he is initiated into a new kind of knowledge that is distinct from ritualism.

As with other teachers in the Upaniṣads, Yama's instruction is about the self. Although he does not discuss *ātman* directly, Yama focuses on typical Upanishadic themes such as the individual and how to overcome death. These ideas are presented in his responses to the three wishes of Naciketas. After the young brahmin's first wish, to