



Ritual, Self and Yoga: On the Ways and Goals of Salvation in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad

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Abstract Throughout its history, the renowned Kaṭha Upaniṣad has often been described as being both incoherent and contradictory. The aim of this paper is to show to what purpose the text was created. To this end, it discusses the connection of the three paths to salvation depicted in the text, viz. the Agnicayana (a powerful Vedic fire-ritual), the Upaniṣadic method of self-knowledge, and yoga. The first part retraces how in the Upaniṣads, the Agnicayana was transformed into a non-material or mental ritual and linked with self-knowledge. The second part analyses how the various salvation goals (heaven, the World of Brahman, liberation from rebirth) could be related to each other. First, the authors redefined the Agnicayana's salvation goal, heaven, to make it identical with liberation. Secondly, they introduced self-knowledge and yoga as alternative and equally powerful means to the same end. In practice, however, the new and world-negating methods were implied to be superior to the costly ritual from which they had drawn their authority. Thus, the authors of the Upaniṣad were more concerned with showing continuity between different religious approaches than upholding consistency of content.

Keywords Agnicayana · Self · Yoga · Immortality · Heaven · Liberation

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Introduction¹

What remains of human beings when they die? Does existence continue after death or not? In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (KU), a curious Brahmin boy named Naciketas addresses this question to Death himself. Previously, Death—also referred to as Yama—proved to be a bad host by neglecting to serve his Brahmin guest for three nights; in recompense, he is now obliged to grant Naciketas three boons, or wishes. Naciketas seizes upon this opportunity, asking his host first to see his father, who out of anger had sent him to Death in the first place, in a happy mood again. For his second boon, he requests a ritual which effectuates an immortal state after death and is even renamed by Yama as *Nāciketacayana*. Lastly, Naciketas questions him about the existence of human beings after death.

The question of how Naciketas's wishes and Death's answers should be understood has given rise to various contradictory interpretations from both traditional commentators and modern scholars. The KU has often been translated, commented upon and interpreted.² Like many other Upaniṣads, it contains elements from various religious epochs, currents and milieus. Its beginning consists of a story about the attainment of a fire-ritual (the *Nāciketacayana*, a sub-form of the *Agnicayana*) leading to a heavenly immortality, which has been adapted from the middle-Vedic *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (TB) to suit the needs of the text.³ The bulk of the text is dedicated to answering the question of whether or not a human being does exist after death, and consists of an anthology of verses on the immortal soul or self (variously called *puruṣa* and *ātman*). Here, it is no longer a fire-ritual, but a kind of gnostic practice or meditation technique (probably called yoga for the very first time) which liberates the practitioner from the cycle of reincarnation. Now a question arises: if the soul or self is already immortal, why then would one need a fire-ritual, self-knowledge or yoga in order to attain immortality? And further: why would one need three different methods?

Even a cursory reading shows that several hands were involved in the creation of the text. It is practically undisputed that the verses of the KU have different origins and were not composed by one single author. As a largely compiled text, the KU is a perfect example of *adaptive reuse*, a longstanding phenomenon often found in architecture, which has recently received special attention in South Asian Studies.⁴

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² Important contributions addressing the interpretation of the KU have been made (among others) by Müller (1884, pp. xxi–xxv, 1–24), Böhtlingk (1890, 1891), Whitney (1890), Deussen (1894, pp. 175–178), Deussen (1921, pp. 261–287), Faddegon (1923), Charpentier (1928/29), Rawson (1934), Johnston (1939), Weller (1953), Helfer (1968), Velankar (1968), Wadhvani (1973), Lipner (1978), Bodewitz (1985), DeVries (1987), Oberlies (1988), Grinshpon (2003, pp. 80–100), Cohen (2008, pp. 193–212), Smith (2016) and Norelius (2017). For emendations of the text, see especially Hillebrandt (1914), Alsdorf (1950), Friš (1955) and (for further and older literature) Weller (1953).

³ TB III 11.8.1–6. Translations can be found in Müller (1884, pp. xxi–xxii), Deussen (1921, pp. 262–263), Whitney (1890, pp. 89–90), and Dumont (1951, pp. 652–653) (including an edition).

⁴ See in particular the collected papers in Freschi and Maas (2017) and Freschi (2015). Reuse can be called adaptive when an already existing, identifiable object—a building or, in the literary context, a (piece of) text—is adapted and reused by another author for his own purposes, which deviate from the

The framework narrative of the Upaniṣad is exemplary here: the beginning of the Naciketas story is quoted verbatim from the TB, but is then continued with new textual material in order to adapt the story to the purpose of the text.⁵

As the Naciketas story from the TB at the beginning of the text illustrates, adaptive reuse has been part of the concept of the KU since the very start. Now, while so-called interpolations certainly exist in the KU—obviously, those who transmitted the text also took over the spirit in which it was created—it is much more interesting to see how generations of teachers and students could make sense of the text at all.⁶ Even if in South Asia textual material was often retained only out of respect for tradition, the fact that the Brahmin frame story not only persisted but was even augmented by (possibly later) insertions and referred back to in the other Vallīs strongly suggests that it was not unimportant for later redactors. Assuming that they did not accumulate verses indiscriminately, one can reasonably ask what sense they saw in linking such a mosaic of spiritual aphorisms with a story about a Vedic fire-ritual.

The aim of this paper is to show to what purpose the text was created and how the KU may have been understood by its first recipients. In order to provide the background for this new interpretation, it discusses the connection of the three paths to salvation mentioned in the text, viz. the Agnicayana (a powerful Vedic fire-ritual), the Upaniṣadic method of self-knowledge, and yoga. In the section “[The Agnicayana and the Self](#),” I will retrace how the Agnicayana developed in other Upaniṣads, where it was adapted as a mentally or verbally performed ritual and linked with self-knowledge. In the section “[Heaven, Liberation and the World of Brahman](#),” I will carve out the similarities of the salvation goals of the various methods taught in the KU.

My basic assumption is that the authors of the Upaniṣad were concerned more with showing continuity between different religious approaches than upholding consistency of content. First, they redefined the Agnicayana’s salvation goal, heaven, to be identical with liberation. Secondly, they introduced self-knowledge and yoga as alternative and equally powerful means to the same end. In practice, however, the new and world-negating methods were implied to be superior to the costly ritual from which they had drawn their authority.

Before offering a new interpretation of the KU—one which is based on a more constructive reading of the text—I want to summarize briefly how the text has been interpreted over the last two centuries up until the recent past. This will show how my interpretation can serve as a counterweight to the approaches of previous scholarship, which still prove to be influential outside the small world of modern Sanskrit philology.

Footnote 4 continued

original; e. g., if a castle is used as a museum; see Freschi and Maas (2017, p. 13). Ibid. it is also stated that the original use must have been interrupted.

⁵ In addition to the framework narrative, most of the other verses, too, were probably already in existence before the creation of the KU. However, since their original context is unknown, it remains open as to what extent they are mere reuses or cases of adaptive reuse in the actual sense. Most often it is only possible to interpret the verses or verse groups of the text in their new context—no straightforward task, as demonstrated by the amount of literature written on the KU.

⁶ The earliest commentary on the KU is Śaṅkara’s, who probably lived about a millennium after the creation of the KU. Since this paper focuses on the early history of the KU, his interpretation (as well as the interpretations of his successors) will not be considered.

The Ritualists and the Philosophers

For most scholars, the Vedic ritual, which is explained to Naciketas as his second boon, could not be reconciled with the gnostic teachings and yoga practices which constitute the greater part of the text. According to the “traditional” explanation of European and American academia, the KU is an anti-ritualistic document. Its present shape is the product of a row of redactors who inflated the text with ever more additions and interpolations. In doing so, however, they ignored the inevitable inconsistencies and contradictions which emerged over time. Consequently, much scholarship has been devoted to the restoration of a more coherent text by determining which passages are original and which are later interpolations. This was often guided by a kind of intuition about the coherence or frictions between the different parts of the text—an approach which does not generally facilitate objective verification.

The greatest advocate of this method was Friedrich Weller, for whom ‘the KU reflects how, in the course of time, different convictions contended with each other.’⁷ For him, the KU is like a protocol which records the corrective measures taken by ‘sacrificial technicians’ (“Opfertechniker”) who were opposed to the new Upaniṣadic wisdom and the yoga teachings presented in the text. Weller interpreted the passages about the Nāciketacayana—which by that time had not yet been identified as such—as an effort made by the guardians of the ritualistic religion to defend their *raison d’être* as mediators of salvation.

The anti-ritualistic reading followed by Weller was most pointedly propounded by William Dwight Whitney and later elaborated by Paul Deussen.⁸ Deussen believed the version of the Naciketas story found in the TB to be based on that of the KU.⁹ He considered this version to be the original because he reckoned the double-mention of the ritual in the TB to be a remodelling of sacrificial priests.¹⁰ For him,

⁷ Tr. of Weller (1953, p. 21): “als habe sich in der Kaṭhōpaniṣad niedergeschlagen, wie die verschiedenen Überzeugungen im Laufe der Zeit miteinander rangen.”

⁸ Cf. Whitney (1890, p. 91): “It is, indeed, little less than absurd that the boy extorts from Death the disclosure of a ceremonial rite that renders one immortal in heaven, and then follows it up with an inquiry whether there is another world and another life.” Others tended to follow the more constructive approach of the traditional commentators, who often divide the Upaniṣad into a *karmakāṇḍa* (a ‘ritual section’) and a *jñānakāṇḍa* (a ‘knowledge section’), the former being devoted to heaven and the latter to final release (*mukti*). In this case, Naciketas’s question is understood to exclusively concern the state of the *released* man (*mukta*); cf. Geldner (1901, p. 154), n. 1; Charpentier (1928, p. 225, n. 103).

⁹ Apart from Deussen, apparently only James S. Hefler favored the idea that the KU reflects an earlier version of the story: “The version found in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* is ‘archaic’ only in the sense that it is earlier. It is quite possible, and even highly probable, that the version found in the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* reflects a more archaic version because it is obviously more complete and reveals much more detail of the esoteric rite.” Hefler (1968, p. 353, n. 19).

¹⁰ Cf. Deussen (1894, pp. 176–177): “[O]ffenbar muss ursprünglich in den drei Wünschen [des TB] eine Steigerung gelegen haben. Der erste bezieht sich auf irdisches Wohlergehen. Der zweite auf die Vergeltung der guten Werke nach dem Tode; ist sie erfolgt, ist der Schatz der guten Werke verbraucht, so muss die Seele zu einem neuen Leben und neuen Sterben auf die Erde zurückkehren [...] Nun folgt der dritte Wunsch, welcher, mit der jenseitigen Vergeltung und Wiederkehr zum Erdendasein nicht zufrieden, nach dem Mittel fragt, das Wiedersterben abzuwehren. Dieses Mittel aber kann nicht wiederum das Naciketas-Feuer sein, eben weil es das Mittel zu dem zweiten Zwecke war, – ganz abgesehen von der Sinnlosigkeit, die darin liegt, nochmals zu lehren, was eben erst gelehrt worden – es muss also wohl hier schon in der ursprünglichen Erzählung die Lehre von der ewigen Erlösung im Sinne der Upaniṣad’s

there must have originally been an increase in the three boons of the TB: the first refers to this-worldly well-being, the second concerns the retribution of the good works after death and the third asks for the means to ward off repeated death. Since in the TB the means to the latter two goals is the Nāciketacayana, for Deussen the third boon originally must have concerned eternal salvation (as in the KU) and was only later clumsily replaced by a ritualist who considered the doctrine of salvation as unsuitable to his purposes.

Deussen's assumption that there is a contradiction between the result of the ritual and eternal salvation even forced him to dismiss the literal meaning of the text. As his second boon, Naciketas asks for the Agni that leads to heaven. Since neither death nor old age exist in this eternal realm, the conclusion must be drawn that any person being there is immortal.¹¹ Deussen, however, did not follow this logic and claimed that the result of the ritual is by no means eternal. In his translation of the KU, he elliptically comments that the fire-ritual only leads to *temporary* heavenly bliss, even though this is not explicitly stated in the 'enthusiastic description' of the text.¹² The third wish, on the other hand, is not directed to the knowledge of survival after death, which is presupposed as established in the second wish, but at the knowledge of the self and the eternal salvation which ensues from this knowledge.¹³

Weller's analysis, too, is based on the assumption that there exists a stark contradiction between the path of cognition and that of the sacrificial cult. For him, the KU was originally created to defend the necessity of sacrificial priests, who feared their own superfluity should immortality become achievable without the need for their mediation.¹⁴ To counter this threat, they simply inserted text passages that again emphasize the importance of the ritual.

This method of explaining the text inevitably raises objections. To assume that the text owes its present shape to the fact that its creators and preservers were blinded by their own ignorance and selfishness is bold at best. Even if the KU, over

Footnote 10 continued

gestanden haben, welche jedoch von dem Verfasser des Taitt. Br. als zu seinen Zwecken nicht passend beseitigt und (plump genug) durch die nochmalige Erwähnung des Naciketas-Feuers ersetzt wurde."

¹¹ KU 1.12–13, 17 and 18. For an analysis of the salvation goal of the KU, see below, "[Salvation in the Katha Upaniṣad](#)". Surprisingly, the possibility that the KU really means what it says was at first tentatively (!) remarked by E. H. Johnston (1939, p. 126, n. 1) in a footnote: "I would observe that [the KU] takes, so far as I know, the archaic view that the second stage, heaven, is a permanent state, where *amṛtatva* is enjoyed (i. 13)."

¹² Cf. Deussen (1921, p. 268): "Der zweite Wunsch, die vorübergehende [!] (vgl. [KU] 2,10) himmlische Seligkeit betreffend. Daß dieselbe nur vorübergehend sei, wird bei ihrer enthusiastischen Schilderung im folgenden nicht streng festgehalten. Das Mittel zu ihr ist die Schichtung des Nāciketa-Feuers, welche hier den Opferkultus im allgemeinen zu repräsentieren scheint."

¹³ Cf. Deussen (1921, p. 270): "Der dritte Wunsch, nicht sowohl (wie es nach der Fragestellung, Vers [KU 2.]20 scheinen kann) auf das Wissen von dem Fortleben nach dem Tode,—denn dieses wird ja schon in der vorhergehenden Frage als feststehend vorausgesetzt,—sondern vielmehr auf die Erkenntnis des Ātman als der wahren Wesenheit des Menschen und damit auf die ewige Erlösung gerichtet."

¹⁴ Cf. Weller (1953, p. 20): "Erringt jemand wie die Unsterblichkeit aus sich heraus, ohne der entscheidenden Leistung eines Mittlers zu bedürfen, dann verliert der Opferpriester seinen Lebensquell, weil er überflüssig wird, wenn er kein Opfer mehr zu vollziehen hat, anderen die Türe zur himmlischen Welt zu öffnen. [...] Das führte in unserer dazu, daß die gefährdeten Opferpriester dem Neuen, das sie bedrohte, das Alte in zähem Beharren wieder entgegenstellten."

its history, may have cross cut different milieus, Weller does not explain why the transmitters of the KU would make a text worse by keeping roughly three quarters of its unwanted “spiritual” or anti-ritualistic content (instead of just burying it in oblivion). Obviously, Weller’s approach would require a far more elaborate clarification of the relationship between ritual, self-knowledge, yoga and its proponents. To simply dismiss the ritual as a poorly revived religious remnant raises more questions than it answers.¹⁵

However, the opposite direction of interpretation also presents certain pitfalls. Recently, Caley Charles Smith presented a distinctly ritualistic reading of the text. He interprets the first Vallī of the KU as a kind of “reversed representation” of several ritual acts of the Agnicayana. He assigns the following ritual acts to the narrative sections of the KU:

1. Naciketas threatens Death as or like a Vaiśvānara fire (KU 1.7). In the ritual, this corresponds to the transport of the fire from the new Gārhapatya fireplace (the former Āhavanīya) to the fire-altar (Agni).¹⁶ Naciketas thus represents the fire: “While the precise ritual details are not clear, the passage seems to depict fire on the altar as a guest.”¹⁷
2. Naciketas, the unserved and therefore dangerous Brahmin/fire, must be appeased. In the ritual, this corresponds to appeasing the altar with recitations and/or water: “KāṭhU 1.7 likens fire to a guest thirsty for water, but the pacification of this thirst, *śāntim kurvanti*, may refer to the ritual pacification of the fire as well.”¹⁸ The theme of appeasement also continues with the angry father, although he is not associated with any fire.
3. The Śṛṅkā, the golden necklace obtained, has a ritual parallel in the Agnicayana.¹⁹

According to Smith, the *reverse* sequence of these events—the transport of the fire and the threat it poses, its appeasement and the integration of the Śṛṅkā into the layers of the altar—explains the metaphysical basis of the Agnicayana.²⁰ In this way, the KU “explains *why* a proper Black Yajurvedic *agnicayana* can transport sacrificers to heaven.”²¹

While some allusions and references cited by Smith could well be understood by a connoisseur of the ritual (which undoubtedly plays an important role), there are certain reasons that speak against this interpretation. First, it is based on the non-objective selection of some elements from both the ritual acts and the sequences: not

¹⁵ A devastating judgment on Weller’s theories was also passed by Bodewitz (1985, pp. 6–10), who discusses the above-mentioned points of criticism in more detail. He concludes (p. 10): “Weller’s sketch of the rivalry between the ritualists and the philosophers ([Weller 1953,] p. 20) [...] is pure fiction.”

¹⁶ Smith (2016, p. 287, n. 20), however, notes that this transport may not have been part of the Nāciketacayana.

¹⁷ Smith (2016, p. 287).

¹⁸ Smith (2016, p. 288).

¹⁹ Smith (2016, p. 289).

²⁰ Smith (2016, p. 291).

²¹ Smith (2016, p. 293).

only does the ritual contain many more sub-procedures than those mentioned by Smith, but also the KU revolves around much more content than the ritual which, strictly speaking, only represents the content of Naciketas's second wish. Furthermore, for Smith's analysis it is necessary to extract some pieces from the generally coherent flow of the narrative, abstract their content by fading out the context, and then read them in reverse order, fading out the overall context of the Upaniṣad.

In order to present a new interpretation of the KU, I suggest returning to the ritual and its interpretations as they can be found in the texts. The important studies of Henk W. Bodewitz (1985), Oberlies (1988/95/96/98), Toshifumi Gotō (1996) and Per-Johan Norelius (2017) have proven that this is, indeed, the most promising approach.

The Agnicayana and the Self

As his second boon, Naciketas asks for 'the Agni leading to heaven' (*svargya agni*), which means that he wants to learn the ritual which is performed using a fire-altar and results in the attainment of heaven. For a long time, both traditional commentators and modern scholars were unaware that the so-called *nāciketa agni* is actually part of a real, identifiable and meaningful ritual.

As the above makes clear, the primary reason for this was that the ritual was usually *a priori* discarded as a meaningful component of the narrative of the KU: neither the traditional Vedāntins nor the European and American researchers of the 19th and 20th centuries wanted to deal with the philosophically uninteresting ritual in more detail, since for both types of recipients this represented an inferior or undeveloped form of religion.

Bodewitz was the first to follow the traces of the Nāciketacayana in the Brāhmaṇas in his seminal essay on the second boon of Naciketas (1985) and was able to solve some puzzles of this passage of the KU by considering the ritual literature. The ritual taught by Death is the so-called Nāciketacayana, the 'laying related to (or named after) Naciketas,' which in turn is one of the five variants of the famous Agnicayana. Since these variants, which originated in the school of the Kaṭhas,²² presuppose the principles and basic structures of the Agnicayana, in the following I will quickly deal with the purposes and interpretations of this ritual before discussing its significance in other Upaniṣads and, most importantly, the KU.²³

The Brāhmaṇas mention several results of the Agnicayana, and there are numerous, partly diverging statements regarding the interpretation of the ritual acts. Interpretations of larger parts and of the entire ritual can be found in the Śatapatha

²² See Dumont (1951, p. 630).

²³ Descriptions of the ritual can be found, among others, in Weber (1873), summarized by Hillebrandt (1897, pp. 162–165); cf. also Dumont (1951, p. 629) and White (1986, p. 192, n. 14). Mention must of course also be made of the two volumes edited by Staal (1983), which primarily deal with a performance of the ritual in 1975 but also contain a general introduction (pp. 27–166).

Brāhmaṇa (ŚB) in the Kāṇḍas VI–X, which feature Śāṇḍilya as their leading teacher.

Most prominent is the central myth of Prajāpati and his son, Agni. In this myth, Prajāpati begins to dissolve after he has created the world, and Agni procures a new body for him. Modeled on this myth, the patron of the sacrifice, too, is to be made immortal by the fire-altar, which is aptly named Agni. Just like Agni reassembled a body for the dying Prajāpati on the cosmic or divine plane, so the priests construct a new divine self for the patron of the sacrifice or *yajamāna* on the ritual plane by means of the (usually bird-shaped) altar. In this manner, the *yajamāna* gains immortality after death with the new body created in ritual.

How this peculiar method works is illustrated in a story in the 10th Kāṇḍa of the ŚB (called *agnirahasya*, the ‘Secret of/about Agni’) where it is reported how the gods obtained the knowledge about the fire-altar. Their teacher, as in the KU and TB, is Death. The result of the ritual is the overcoming of repeated death and immortality in the hereafter:

ŚB X 4.3.10²⁴

Those who know this (scil. the secret knowledge about the Agni) in this way or those who perform this ritual, come into existence again after death and, as soon as they come into existence (again), attain immortality. Those, however, who do not know in this way and those who do not perform this ritual, come into existence again after death and become food for precisely this one (scil. for death) again and again.

The desired effect of the ritual is based (among other things) on the ritual identification of different entities. Different acts and objects of the ritual, as for instance the inflammation of a fire, a certain utensil or a metre used in a hymn are put into meaningful relation with entities of the world or of the body. The “mystic” correspondences are a varied but important component of the ritual, the purpose of which is not least to correlate the microcosm with actions in the macrocosm.

As is known, the Brāhmaṇas are brimming with identifications, and even the ŚB itself concludes that ultimately, the fire-altar is everything (ŚB X 5.4.14). This total identification, however, does not amount to meaningless tautology. Quite the opposite: the altar is the whole transient world, and thus its construction (somewhat paradoxically) leads to the overcoming of exactly this transience and the attainment of both worldly goods and an immortal state after death.

Turning now to the Nāciketacayana, the purposes of the Agnicayana known to us from the ŚB can also be found in a similar form in the TB, which places special emphasis on knowledge. If someone conducts the ritual *and* has the correct knowledge of its correspondences (*yā evaṃ véda*), ‘verily, the desire with which he sacrifices is fulfilled’²⁵ and ‘he becomes the possessor of (safe) places and solidly

²⁴ *té yā evaṃ etād vidūḥ | yé vaiṭāt kārma kurvāte mṛtvā pūnaḥ sām̐bhavanti té saṃbhāvanta evāṃmṛtatvām abhisām̐bhavanty ātha yā evaṃ nā vidūr yé vaiṭāt kārma nā kurvāte mṛtvā pūnaḥ sām̐bhavanti tā etāsyavāñnam pūnaḥpunar bhavanti |.*

²⁵ *sām̐ ha vā asmai sá kām̐ḥ padyate | yātkāmo yājate | TB III 11.7.2.*

established.²⁶ Most importantly, there are also otherworldly results for the knowing sacrificer: he ‘enters with the body (of the Nāciketacayana) into the heavenly world’²⁷ and gains ‘an infinite, boundless and imperishable world behind the sun,’²⁸ and ‘as someone standing on a chariot looks back at the turning side parts (= wheels), so he looks back at day and night, and day and night do not reach his world.’²⁹

Thus, the soteriological goal of the Agnicayana as well as the Nāciketacayana is the attainment of the state of infinite immortality. For the Nāciketacayana it is explicitly stated that after death, one reaches a somewhat abstract world behind or above the sun, where one is not only relieved of the alternation of day and night, but in particular, of repeated death.

The cosmology upon which this idea is based is more clearly articulated in the oldest Upaniṣads than in the Brāhmaṇas and Saṃhitās. The old Upaniṣads state that the earth, which is covered by the vault of the sky, is similar to a “prison”: after cremation, people who are “destined to be reborn go up to the moon in the form of smoke or vapor; from there they return to earth as rain.”³⁰ On earth, they enter the plants, which are then eaten by a man and are transferred through his seed into the womb of a woman, where they finally assume a new body. The sun, however, is the door through which one can see what lies outside this prison and its cycle of rebirth and redeath, namely, a world of light and immortality. Those who have the liberating knowledge are able to break the cycle and escape through the bright opening in the sky.

The salvation as it can be found in some Brāhmaṇas and old Upaniṣads, which is not (yet) called *mukti*, thus refers to an escape from the cosmos rather than to a liberation from an eternal cycle of rebirths. Although the two concepts seem to be very similar on a superficial level (and actually were combined in later times), they can nevertheless be clearly distinguished in their original formulations and are likely to have originated in two different cultural milieus. However, at some point the concept of a more abstract cycle of rebirths, which is commonly known as Saṃsāra, did come into contact with the late Vedic conception, and this contact may have prompted the integration of the goal of *eternal*, never-ending immortality into the Vedic religion.

As is widely known, being a god in heaven was (and is) viewed as a finite state in Buddhism and other “heterodox” traditions. Adherents of this view therefore criticized that it makes little sense to carry out an elaborate ritual if one is doomed to die again when one’s “credit” is exhausted. The advocates of Vedic ritualism, however, reacted accordingly:

At the end of the Vedic period [...] we see that with the popularity of other circles, their claims on a different “life” after death and their criticism of the

²⁶ *āyātanavān bhavati | gācchati pratiṣṭhām* | TB III 11.7.2.

²⁷ *sāsarīra evā svargām lokām eti* | TB III 11.7.3.

²⁸ *[a]nantām apārām akṣayyām lokām jayati | yāḥ pārenādityām* | TB III 11.7.4.

²⁹ *yāthā rāthe tiṣṭhan pākṣasī paryāvartamāne pratyāpekṣate | evām ahorātrē pratyāpekṣate | nāsyāhorātrē lokām āpnutaḥ* | TB III 11.7.4.

³⁰ Olivelle (1998, p. 21).

Vedic claims for unlimited happiness and immortality were definitely taken seriously. Life in heaven became more and more dissociated from corporeal enjoyments. Criticism of the Vedic claim on permanent immortality in heaven was countered by the doctrine of the overcoming of death in heaven (*punarṁṛtyu*). In this threatened position the closed front of Vedic ritualism broke down, and deliverance from death in heaven (i.e., Vedic immortality) now became claimed by a limited number of rituals (especially the Agnicayana).³¹

Following Johannes Bronkhorst's approach, this process could also be classified as part of a centuries-long reaction of Brahmanical culture to the religion and spirituality that was at that time prevalent in the east of what is today's northern India. It is known that the so-called Śramaṇa traditions, to which Buddhism and Jainism belong, originated in this area and were widespread above all in Magadha and its periphery. These currents had many lay followers and for a long time enjoyed the particular protection of the kings of Magadha.³² They offered a fundamentally different concept to that of ritualistic Brahmanism. Both the political support they enjoyed and their alternative worldviews posed a certain threat and challenged a reaction on the part of the Brahmin ritual religion, the epicenter of which in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy lay in the so-called Āryāvarta in the western Gangetic plain. Even the Agnicayana has been suspected of originating from outside the Vedic sphere, inter alia because of its otherworldly and life-denying orientation.³³

Among others, the conviction that a certain kind of knowledge of the true nature of the self, which is envisioned as immortal and changeless and leads to liberation, can be attributed to what Bronkhorst has called "the spiritual culture of Greater Magadha."³⁴ In the following, I want to show how in several Upaniṣads the tenet of the self has been integrated into the Vedic worldview by connecting it with the Agnicayana, before reverting to the role of this ritual in the KU.³⁵ In doing so, I want to demonstrate that the Agnicayana not only came to be viewed as an antidote to repeated death, but in the course of time also became the point of departure in

³¹ Bodewitz (2002, p. 221). A perfect example of a very similar product of contact is the story of Yayāti, where the idea of karmic retribution is grafted onto the naturalistic conception of rebirth as it can be found in the early Upaniṣads; see Mahābhārata I 81.1–82.2; cf. Hill (2001, pp. 6–11).

³² Cf. Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 1–14).

³³ Cf. Converse (1974, p. 91): "The strong emphasis on death, as well as fecundity, in the primal divine being, Prajāpati, who represents the cosmic process, tends to produce or to reflect a particular religious attitude toward the world; the believer regards the world, if not as suffering and evil at least as ambiguous, as a condition from which he seeks to escape. The world, the human situation, bears a negative valuation, and religion is regarded as assisting man to extricate himself from it."

³⁴ See Bronkhorst (2007, p. 28). Although Buddhism, too, had its provenance in this culture, it was rather skeptical about the existence of an individual and eternal self and later, non-Buddhist literature definitely portrays it as denying the self. Since the KU was definitely created after Buddhism began to hold sway, it is very probable that those who in Naciketas's question do not believe in the existence of man after death are, in fact, Buddhists. For reasons of space, however, this matter cannot be discussed here.

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the Agnicayana and especially its relation to the Puruṣa in the heart and the solar Puruṣa, see Norelius (2017, pp. 445–459), who also followed the trail laid by Bodewitz (1985) in other Upaniṣads.

other Upaniṣadic teachings about the Ātman, the immortal self of man, and his relationship to life after death.

As will be seen, in these cases, Vedic (or rather: ritualistic) tenets and the tenets of the culture of Greater Magadha have often blurred to the point where they have become indistinguishable: ritual merges with meditation, the body of the fire-altar is identified with the eternal Ātman and the naturalistic cycle of rebirths fuses with the concept of Saṃsāra.

Śāṅḍilya's Doctrine in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (ChU III 14) we find a short passage that contains a teaching ascribed to a teacher named Śāṅḍilya (this teaching was later called Śāṅḍilya-Vidyā in the commentarial literature).³⁶ According to this doctrine, the Ātman, i.e. the 'inner core of being' within man, should be *venerated* (*upa+ās*)³⁷ as 'the Whole' (*sarvam*) and Brahman respectively, in order to *become* Brahman after death.³⁸ The salvific effect of the teaching is thus based on the realization of a correspondence (Ātman = Brahman) which is typical of the Upaniṣads.

The doctrine of the ChU obviously refers to a passage of the ŚB also attributed to Śāṅḍilya, which is found in the 10th Kāṇḍa.³⁹ In the doctrine of Brāhmaṇa, too, we find mention of the Brahman, which here is to be understood as 'the True' (*satyā*), as well as of the Ātman, which should be envisioned as a golden person having the size of a grain. However, the word *brahman* mentioned in this context in the ŚB probably does not refer to the cosmos, but rather, following its older meaning, denotes an effective and salvific 'formulation,' which—if the "older" Śāṅḍilya of the ŚB can be interpreted in this way—effectuates a new existence after death for someone who has the right willpower and conviction.⁴⁰ If one accepts Śāṅḍilya's doctrine about the self—i.e., his *brahman* or formulation—as true and is sufficiently convinced of it, one will become this self after death.

It is very likely that the teaching of the later ChU was deliberately attributed to Śāṅḍilya, the teacher known from the ŚB, in order to transfer his authority to the new, but similar teaching. In the past, the two teachings were not considered different, both because of this attribution and their similarity. Toshifumi Gotō (1996), however, showed that 'the doctrine of the ŚB, which attaches new sense to a concrete ritual action of the Agnicayana by means of an additional inner ritual, was taken by the author of the ChU and transformed into a doctrine about Ātman and Brahman.'⁴¹ The Ātman, which in the ritual is created with the help of the Brahman

³⁶ Cf. Gotō (1996, p. 71, n. 1) and Norelius (2017, pp. 450–451).

³⁷ "When a text states that someone venerates X as Y, the meaning is that he recognizes the hidden connection or homology between the two." Olivelle (1998, p. 24).

³⁸ Translations of the text can be found in Olivelle (1998, p. 209) and Gotō (1996, pp. 73–74).

³⁹ ŚB X 6.3. An English translation of the text can be found in Norelius (2017, p. 450).

⁴⁰ Cf. Gotō (1996, pp. 75–77).

⁴¹ Tr. of Gotō (1996, pp. 83–84): "Aus den vorgelegten Betrachtungen dürfte klar hervorgehen, dass die im ŚB belegte Lehre, die mit zusätzlichem innerem Ritual einen neuen Sinn in eine konkrete Ritualhandlung des hineinlegt, vom Verfasser der ChU in die Hand genommen und in eine Upaniṣad-Lehre über Ātman und Brahman umgestaltet wurde".

(= the right formulation) for heaven, is in the Upaniṣad interpreted as an already existing, inner core of being which is to be identified with Brahman (= the cosmos).

Even if Śāṅḍilya's 'secret teaching about the fire-altar' (*agnirahasya*) came into existence after the creation of the ritual and must not be understood to be its only legitimate explanation, it was nevertheless strongly associated with the ritual, its effectiveness and its purpose: both the Agnicayana as well as the doctrines of the two Śāṅḍilyas that are related to the ritual aim at procuring a post-mortal existence for the *yajamāna* or the believer in Śāṅḍilya's doctrine, respectively, by creating or realizing the Ātman.

The "Altar of Words" in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad

In the second chapter of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (TU), the so-called Brahma Vallī, there is a description of five 'bodies' or 'selves' (Ātmans), which resemble a matryoshka doll, one being inside the other and each again consisting of five parts. These five bodies emulate the bird-shaped altar, which also consists of five parts (the bird's head, trunk, two wings and tail) and is formed of five layers of bricks.⁴²

According to Yitzhak Freedman, the recitation of the text probably functioned as a kind of verbal⁴³ ritual, in which a teacher constructs a new body for his pupil through the use of words or, rather, "unveils" it.⁴⁴ The purpose of the ritual is thus—similar to the original—to create a new body for life after death, or more precisely: to recognize this body or self with the help of the teachings of the Upaniṣad.⁴⁵ How the text was used and how it was related to the "material" Agnicayana is difficult to determine:

It might have been a separate procedure intended to replace the original *agnicayana* entirely, or a complementary one, perhaps using the brick-made *agni* as a model to which the teacher points as he utters the crucial words. Another possibility is that the construction of the self happened over a long period of time, during which it was broken up into five occasions, each of which was devoted to the creation of one of the five layers of the verbal *agni* in the disciple's evolving *ātman*.⁴⁶

⁴² See Freedman (2012) and Norelius (2017, pp. 451–452). The five bodies in the TU (II 2.2–5) are (1) the material body 'consisting of food' (*annamaya*), (2) the body 'consisting of vital functions' (*prāṇamaya*), (3) the body 'consisting of mind' (*manomaya*), (4) the body 'consisting of recognition' (*viññānamaya*) and (5) the body 'consisting of bliss' (*ānandamaya*).

⁴³ The demonstrative pronouns in the text indicate that it is not an interiorization or purely mental transformation of the ritual: "It can be heard and observed as it happens—a teacher is speaking and gesturing to his disciple." Freedman (2012, p. 336).

⁴⁴ Cf. Freedman (2012, p. 336): "[I]n TU2, we find the basis for a performance of the ritual of constructing a self in the form of *agni* 'verbalized,' in the sense that in it, verbal actions, or speech acts (the uttering of statements such as 'this is his head'), replace physical actions (laying down an earthen brick during the *agnicayana*). It is a verbalized *agnicayana*." Of course, it must not be forgotten that the text could have been used outside such a verbal ritual and that in the later exegetics of Vedānta, it was also received independently from its original function.

⁴⁵ Cf. Freedman (2012, p. 327): "This is a description of the final journey, the journey beyond death, which leads to the bliss residing in the core of man."

⁴⁶ Freedman (2012, pp. 336–337).

To me, it is quite possible that the altar was “built” or explained within the body of another, with the priest or teacher pointing not at the sacrificial ground, but at his own limbs or the limbs of whoever is to be made immortal. After all, the departure of the practice is the *puruṣa*, the ‘man.’ The “practice” starts: ‘Now, a man *here* is formed from the essence of food. This *here* is his head [...]’.⁴⁷ All the other selves within adapt to this outer appearance of a man.

What is clear is that whoever applies the method of the text ‘obtains the highest’ possible plane of existence and attains ‘all objects of desire, along with the wise *brahman*’.⁴⁸ The innermost self he gains is made of bliss (*ānandamaya*) which is many times greater than that enjoyed by even the most enviable of all human beings (TU II 8–9).

The Altar/Yogin in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad

In the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (ŚU), which according to Thomas Oberlies presents an attempt to amalgamate the two gods Rudra and Agni, we find a number of Vedic quotations which originally were employed in the Agnicayana.⁴⁹ Oberlies points out that the yoga practice which is taught in the following verses may have been modeled on the structure of the fire-altar.⁵⁰ For his meditation, the practitioner (who is not explicitly called a yogin in this text) is supposed to keep his body ‘triple erect’ (*trirunnata*, ŚU II 8). Originally, this word was used to describe a special kind of *devayajana* or ‘sacrificial ground’ but was later transferred onto the altar itself. In the ŚU, the yogin “constructs” himself like (or as) the Agni/altar of the ritual, the three parts being his knees, navel and mouth.⁵¹

If Oberlies’s thesis is correct, the ŚU presents another example of how spiritual practices were connected with the Agnicayana by a comparison of the yogin with the fire-altar. The salvation goal of the ritual, however, has not been taken over. In the ŚU, the immediate goal of yoga is to make one’s body *yogāgnimaya*, i.e., to cause it to ‘have the same nature as Agni by means of yoga’ or to ‘be constituted of the yoga-fire/Agni’,⁵² and thus to become identical with the one god Agni/Rudra. The purpose of the practice is not the attainment of any kind of *loka* (let alone *svarga*) but the fulfillment of all desires, the obtainment of sovereignty, Brahman, immortality, endless peace, infinity, freedom from illness, suffering, age, (re)birth, and death. In short: liberation from *saṃsāra* (*saṃsāramokṣa*, ŚU VI 16).⁵³

⁴⁷ *sa vā eṣa puruṣo ’nnarasamayaḥ | tasyedam eva śiraḥ | TU II 1.1.*

⁴⁸ *brahmavid āpnoti param |; sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaścitā | TU II 1.1.* Since *vipaścit* is usually not attributed to inanimate objects, it is very probable that *brahman* here does not refer to a formulation, but to the cosmic Brahman. On the translation of this verse, cf. also Beall (1986).

⁴⁹ ŚU II 1–13, see Oberlies (1988, pp. 55–57).

⁵⁰ Oberlies (1998, pp. 48–54).

⁵¹ For the three parts or layers of the altar, see below, “The *adhyaṃmayoga* of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*”.

⁵² “durch Yoga mit Agni eines Wesens geworden” Oberlies (1988, p. 52). Oberlies (1996, p. 133, n. 51) later preferred the simpler translation “bestehend aus Yoga-Feuer.”

⁵³ For the salvation goal of the ŚU, see I 11, II 12, III 1, 7, 10, 13, 21, IV 11, 14–17, 20, V 7, 9, 13, VI 10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20.

The Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad and the 3+2 Layers of the Altar

The Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad (MaiU) contains a rather detailed interpretation or elaboration of the concepts of the Agnicayana, in which the Ātman plays an important role.⁵⁴ At the beginning of the Upaniṣad we read:

MaiU I 1.1⁵⁵

The fire-laying of the ancient was a Brahman-ritual. Therefore the sacrificer, having laid these fires, must think upon the self. Verily, it must be realized that the ritual becomes truly full and complete in all respects.

Immediately afterwards⁵⁶ it is explained that the self is of a double nature, having, like in the KU, a bodily and a solar manifestation:

MaiU VI 1⁵⁷

Verily, he carries his self in two ways, this one here which is the vital breath and that one there which is the sun.

In yet another passage, we even can find a teaching which is very similar to the “verbal Agnicayana” in the TU. Here, the goal of the (mental?) ritual is explicitly said to be Brahman:

MaiU VI 33⁵⁸

This Agni, made of five bricks (= brick layers?), verily is the year. [...] Having a head, two wings, a back and a tail, this Agni is like a man. The earth here is Prajāpati’s first laying. [...] The interspace here is Prajāpati’s second laying. This sky is Prajāpati’s third laying. With the hands he makes an offering of the *yajamāna* to the Knower of the Self. The Knower of the Self, having thrown him upward, proffers him to Brahman. There he becomes blissful, joyful.

⁵⁴ According to van Buitenen (1962, p. 37), in the MaiU the symbolism of the Agnicayana is transferred to the Agnyādhāna. Bodewitz (1985, p. 11, n. 27) denies this: “Probably the Agnihotra, the Agnicayana and their interiorizations (partly in the form of a Prāṇāgnihotra, partly to be regarded as a mental and symbolic Agnicayana) are meant here.” He argues that *ci* respectively *cayana* can refer not only to the “layers,” but also to the “contemplation” of the fire. Which of the two rituals is really meant, is difficult to determine; in any case, the symbolism comes from the Agnicayana.

⁵⁵ *brahmayajño vā eṣa yat pūrveṣāṃ cayanam | tasmād yajamānaś citvaitān agnīn ātmānam abhidhyāyet | sa pūrṇaḥ khalu vā addhāvikalāḥ sampadyate yajñāḥ |*. Whether in the MaiU the ritual is replaced by a mental ritual or not, is controversial; see Bodewitz (1985, p. 11, n. 27). The Upaniṣad does not comment on this. The interpretations of the sacrifice are in any case clearly in the foreground of the text; van Buitenen (1962, p. 37) explains: “*brahmayajña* is a rite which is more than the literal observance of its ritual detail, and is accomplished by the esoteric knowledge of the macrocosmic and microcosmic connections implied.”

⁵⁶ The passages translated here are, in van Buitenen’s (1962) view, part of the original version of the MaiU; in this version, this section and the next (regardless of the numbering) follow directly one after the other.

⁵⁷ *dvidhā vā eṣa ātmānaṃ bibharti | ayaṃ yaḥ prāṇo yaś cāsā ādityaḥ |*.

⁵⁸ *pañcēṣṭako vā eṣo 'gniḥ saṃvatsaraḥ | [...] śiraḥpakṣasapṛṣṭhapucchavān eṣo 'gniḥ puruṣavidhaḥ | [...] seyaṃ prajāpateḥ prathamā citiḥ [...] | tad idam antarīkṣaṃ prajāpater dviṭyā citiḥ / saiṣa dyauḥ prajāpates tṛtīyā citiḥ | karair yajamānasyātmavide 'vadānaṃ karoti / athātmavid utkṣipya brahmaṇe prāyacchat | tatrānandī modī bhavati |*. Cf. the tr. by van Buitenen (1962, pp. 48–49). For emendations integrated into the transcription and a discussion, see van Buitenen (1962, pp. 29–33).

Here, three layers of the altar correspond to the cosmos: (1) earth, (2) interspace, (3) sky. Then follow two new elements, the ‘Knower of the Self’ (*ātmavid*) and Brahman. They are not, however, designated as the 4th and 5th layers. Both van Buitenen (1962, pp. 31–33) and Norelius (2017, p. 452), comparing the MaiU with the TU, identify these layers as (4) the self ‘consisting of consciousness’ (*vijñānamaya*) and (5) the self ‘consisting of bliss’ (*ānandamaya*).⁵⁹

However, the situation seems to be more complex, and the fact that the MaiU does not call the ‘Knower of the Self’ (*ātmavid*) the 4th, and Brahman the 5th layer deserves attention. It is very likely that the MaiU does not envision the altar as having five layers, but rather three with two additional items that are not, strictly speaking, part of the structure of the altar.⁶⁰ In order to shed more light on this difficult situation, in the following I will quickly review how the layers of the Agni were conceived of in the ŚB and in other Upaniṣads.

In the ŚB, Celaka Śāṅḍilyāyana (a descendant of Śāṅḍilya) explains:

ŚB X 4.5.3⁶¹

The three layers containing the naturally-perforated (pebbles) are these very worlds here [viz. earth, interspace and sky], the fourth (layer) is the sacrificer, and the fifth (layer) is all objects of desire.

On this, Julius Eggeling (1897, p. 364, n. 2) remarks that the three layers containing the naturally-perforated pebbles are the 1st, 3rd and 5th physical layers and that the 2nd and 4th layers (which are called the fourth and the fifth by Celaka) are the additional layers in between. While in this idiosyncratic but comprehensible way of counting the extra layers might indeed be part of the physical altar, this is not as conclusive in later texts.

Given that the correspondences of the three main layers in the MaiU remain unaltered, it would *a priori* make sense to locate the two extra layers *between* the main layers as proposed by Eggeling for the ŚB. However, neither the MaiU nor the other texts give any indication that this is the case: the ŚU and the MaiU mention only three layers, and while the TU does enumerate five, the last two are not located between the three main layers (or selves, in that case) but rather inside them.

While it is clear that the bodies in the TU are each within the other, the MaiU adopts a more outward-looking perspective. This is suggested by the words *upa +sam+kram* ‘to step over, to merge’ and *antare* ‘within’ in the TU and *ut+kṣip* ‘throw up’ in the MaiU. Since the extra layers or selves in these two Upaniṣads are otherwise very similar and are both added as the last items in a linear sequence, their location in the MaiU (which does not actually call them layers) is to be assumed not within or between, but outside or maybe on top of the three main parts of the altar. But what, then, happened to the two intermediate layers?

The easiest way to explain this confusing situation is to assume that the texts are somewhat confused themselves. The conflict produced by the conception of a three-

⁵⁹ Cf. above, “The ‘Altar of Words’ in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad.”

⁶⁰ Cf. Oberlies (1988, p. 51, n. 69).

⁶¹ *imā evā lokās tisrah svayamāṅṛṇāvatyas citayo yājamānas caturthī sārve kāmāḥ pañcam[ī ...] |.*

Table 1 The layers of the Agnicayana in the Upaniṣads

Physical layers	ŚB (layers)	TU (selves)	MaiU (layers)	ŚU (yogin)
–	5.? all desires	5. bliss	5. Brahman	
–	4.? sacrificer	4. recognition	4. Knower of the Self	
5	3. (sky)	3. mind	3. sky	3. mouth
4	5.? all desires			
3	2. (interspace)	2. vital breath	2. interspace	2. navel
2	4.? sacrificer			
1	1. (earth)	1. food	1. earth	1. knees

layered altar, which was known to have five (physical) layers was resolved by ignoring the fact that the three most important layers are not on top of each other. The physical construction of the altar obviously became less important in its mental or verbal derivatives. The idea of a 3+2 structure of the altar, however, persisted and was interpreted more freely (see Table 1). In the ŚU, the “altar” was envisioned as a tripartite structure from the outset.

Thus, the Knower of the Self (the 4th item in the MaiU) may be understood to be his “true” and separate self or *puruṣa* (and not the 2nd physical layer), and Brahman to be the sphere above the three-layered cosmos comprising the earth, interspace and the sunlit sky (and not the 4th physical layer).⁶² The fact that Brahman could thus be located “above” the sky perfectly fits the cosmology of the middle and late Vedic period as described above.

To analyse in detail the many similarities between the MaiU and the KU is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. In the following, only one further common feature of the two texts shall be briefly addressed, namely the fact that, just like the KU, the MaiU juxtaposes the terminologies of ritual and yoga.

At the beginning of the MaiU, we learn of the existence of a ‘Brahman-ritual’ (*brahmayajña*, see the translation of MaiU I 1 above). The physical or external fires used in this rite are to be understood by the sacrificer as his own Ātman. Through the knowledge of the microcosmic and macrocosmic Ātman, the person ‘who knows thus thinks upon the Ātman alone and sacrifices into the Ātman alone.’⁶³ However, in the same text the sacrificer is also said to be a ‘renouncer’ (*saṃnyāsīn*): ‘He who knows thus is a renouncer, a yogin, a sacrificer into the self’⁶⁴ and withdraws his senses from all external objects. But how can the sacrificer here be a yogin and, at the same time, a renouncer, who is generally not allowed to run any fire?

According to van Buitenen the second text passage is an interpolation of a redactor, which was added to the original MaiU from a later text of a similar name. In contrast to the “ritualistic” Ur-Upaniṣad, originally probably called Maitreya/

⁶² For the correspondence of the three layers to the parts of the cosmos, cf. Oberlies (1988, p. 51). For the resulting quaternary (3+1, excluding the sacrificer / Knower of the Self) structure of the cosmos and its corollaries, see Norelius (2017, pp. 433–437).

⁶³ *evaṃvid ātman evābhidyāyaty ātman eva yajati* | MaiU VI 9. Cf. the tr. by van Buitenen (1962, p. 137).

⁶⁴ *yo haivaṃ veda saṃnyāsī yogī cātmayājī c[a]* | MaiU VI 10. Cf. the tr. by van Buitenen (1962, p. 139).

Maitreyī/Maitrī Upaniṣad, the inserted “Southern Maitrāyaṇī” is a Sāṃkhya-Yoga treatise “without Vedic relationships, which, had it been in ślokas, might have turned up as part of the Mokṣadharmā.”⁶⁵

If one accepts van Buitenen’s elaborate reconstruction,⁶⁶ the MaiU demonstrates that it was acceptable to compile texts which are contradictory in a certain way, especially if the merged texts share some characteristics. In the MaiU, for example, this is the teaching of the two Ātman: while the original Upaniṣad speaks of the microcosmic/macrocsmic Ātman (viz. vital breath and sun), the Southern Maitrāyaṇī deals with a physical/mental Ātman.⁶⁷ Obviously, this technique of producing texts was accepted as a legitimate artistic device.

The *adhyātmayoga* of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Although the KU cannot be neatly divided into to a Northern or Southern text, the conceptual developments which took place before and during its composition prove to be very similar to those of the MaiU, for in the KU, too, ritual is combined with self-knowledge and yoga. According to Henk Bodewitz, the difficult verses KU 1.16–18⁶⁸ (in all probability spoken by Death), refer to the different levels of interpretation of the ritual. Just like in other rituals, these are three: (1) the macrocosmic level related to the deities (*adhidaivam*), (2) the mesocosmic level related to ritual (*adhiyajñam*), and (3) the microcosmic level related to the body of the *yajamāna* (*adhyātmam*).

These are understood in the KU as three coordinated rituals performed simultaneously on the macro-, meso- and microcosmic level.⁶⁹ The patron of the sacrifice, who belongs to the microcosm, must enter into a connection with these rituals forming a triad, i.e., he must identify them with each other and with himself. This concerns three specific entities in particular: the Brahman, the Śṛṅkā and the ‘praiseworthy’ (*īḍya*) god.⁷⁰

According to the usual logic of the sacrifice, the praiseworthy god must be the self, which is also called *deva* in 2.12 and 2.21. As the first, last, and supreme principle, knowledge of the self is the highest religious goal and as such it is also identified with the supreme deity (the *īś*, *īśa*, *īśāna* or *īśvara*) in other Upaniṣads.⁷¹ It is thus more than likely that the praiseworthy god (*deva īḍya*) at this point of the

⁶⁵ Van Buitenen (1962, p. 21).

⁶⁶ His work was reviewed positively by Paul Hacker (1966). Cohen (2008, p. 256) finds it “unnecessarily complicated” and takes the older (the non-Southern text) to be an addition to the Southern Maitrāyaṇī; however, she does not go into this matter in more detail in this context.

⁶⁷ See van Buitenen (1962, pp. 26–27).

⁶⁸ For translations, see Olivelle (1998, pp. 377, 379) and Haas (2018, pp. 19–20).

⁶⁹ This can be seen in the expression *trikarmakṛt* which can only refer to ‘someone who performs three rituals’ and not a ‘triple’ ritual or the like.

⁷⁰ For more details on the identification of these entities, see Bodewitz 1985.

⁷¹ See, e.g., BĀU IV 4.15 (*ātman = deva = īśāna*); V 6.1 (*puruṣa = sarveśāna*); KauU III 8 (*ātman = lokapāla, lokādhipati, lokaśa*); Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (MāU) 6 (*ātman = sarveśvara*); Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (MuU) III 1.2–3 (*puruṣa = kartṛ, īśa*).

KU, which is very close to the ritual, does not only designate the Ātman, but at the same time also the one god identical with it.⁷²

The most important manifestation of this god is the sun. In KU I 17 (for a translation, see above), a mysterious entity called *brahmajajñā* is associated with this *deva*. According to Bodewitz (1985, p. 23), “*brahmajajñam* refers to the verse *brahmajajñānam* [...], which accompanies the laying down of the gold plate, the *rukma*, which in my hypothesis is called *srīkā* in this particular piling.” In this verse, which can be found in various texts, *bráhma jajñānám* refers to the rising sun.⁷³

As has recently been shown by Johan-Per Norelius (2017), the connection and even identification of the self with the sun can be found in several other texts, too. Norelius observes how the anthropomorphic conception of the Puruṣa, who was envisioned as a little person with solar characteristics within man, in the course of time gradually gave way to the theory of a more abstract and transcendent being.

The fate of the post-Vedic *puruṣa* conception is characterized by a decline in favor of the *ātman*-theory. In the Sāṃkhya-influenced speculations of the epic the term [*puruṣa*] is still often used interchangeably with *ātman* to designate the soul, though its anthropomorphic traits are seldom referred to; yet a non-philosophical text like the Sāvitrī story—which presumably draws on more popular beliefs—still describes the “thumb-sized” manikin that is extracted from Satyavant’s body by the god of death, in a manner reminding one of the Vedic homunculus and its extraction from the body, like a reed from its sheath.⁷⁴

In the KU, this solar being is said to reside within the cave of the heart and must be realized with the help of ‘knowledge’ or ‘recognition’ (*adhigama*) which is produced by the so-called *adhyātmayoga*, i.e., the ‘yoga that focuses on the self.’⁷⁵

⁷² As Bodewitz (1985, pp. 23–24) puts it: “The *devaḥ īdyah* is the sun, the manifestation of *brahman*, the gold plate, the fire, the soul, the *īśvara*.” In the KU, the Ātman is identified with the one god (*īśāna* etc.) or called “deity” (*deva*) in following places: 2.12 (*taṃ durdarśam gūḍham anupraviṣṭam guhāhītam gahvareṣṭham purāṇam* [...] *devaṃ matvā* [...]), 2.21 (*kas taṃ madāmadaṃ devaṃ madanyo jñātum arhati*), 4.5 (*ya imaṃ [...] veda ātmānam* [...] *īśānam*), 4.12–13 (*aṅguṣṭhamātraḥ puruṣo* [...] *īśāno bhūtabhavyasya* [...]), (5.8 [*puruṣo* (...) *tad eva śukraṃ tad brahma tad evāmṛtam ucyate*]), 5.12 (*eko vaśī sarvabhūtāntarātmā*).

⁷³ Among others, the verse can be found in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā (TS IV 2.8.8d): *bráhma jajñānám prathamám purástād, ví śimatáh surúco vená āvaḥ / sá budhniyā upamā asya viṣṭhāh, satás ca yónim ásataś ca vívaḥ* // ‘The Brahman born first in the east Vena has unveiled from the brightly shining boundary (= the horizon), its radiations from the depth, he has opened the womb of being and of non-being.’ In the ŚB (VII 4.1.14) the verse is explained as follows: *bráhma jajñānám prathamám purástād iti | asáu vá ādityó bráhmāharaḥ purástāy jāyate* [...] | “‘The Brahman born first in the east ...’: Brahman is yonder sun; it is born day by day in the east.’

⁷⁴ Norelius (2017, p. 462).

⁷⁵ *adhyātmam* is used in the older Upaniṣads only in the context of the three levels of interpretation of the sacrifice as an adverb meaning ‘with reference to the self / the body’; see Rawson (1934, p. 94), n. 4. However, the wording here plays with another possible translation of the *ātman*: *adhyātma* obviously means ‘with reference to the self’ not in the sense of the body but of the immortal essence. Cf. Rawson’s translation (1934, pp. 92–93): “Here *adhyātma-yoga* may be rendered ‘spiritual concentration’ or, more specifically, ‘concentrated meditation upon the Self.’”

Now this wording must not be taken to simply refer to yoga in the sense of Epic Sāṃkhya-Yoga or even the yoga of Patañjali. Rather, in the KU we see a transition in progress: the solar dwarf of the ritual's gnostic teachings is tacitly identified with the more abstract conception of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga passages, where he is described as an all-pervading entity without any marks or attributes. What is important here is that the older conception of the soul as a homunculus within the body obviously persisted even when more abstract and sophisticated notions were already in existence, and as I will show below, popular or unsophisticated belief (with which yogins, mystics and philosophers of all kinds were certainly familiar) may have been very influential in another case of the KU, too.

Conclusions to the section **"The Agnicayana and the Self"**

The evidence presented above shows different ways in which the Agnicayana was drawn upon in several Upaniṣads as part of a strategy to conceptualize their new teachings on the self within the framework of known Vedic categories. In the ChU (see above, "[Śāṅḍilya's Doctrine in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad](#)"), an Upaniṣadic teaching was related to a similar teaching associated with the Agnicayana by ascribing it to Śāṅḍilya, one of the most famous mystic expounders of the ritual. In the TU (3b), an Agni is built verbally or mentally with five bodies or selves, the innermost of which is the blissful Ātman. The ŚU likens the body of a yogin to the threefold structure of the fire-altar (3c). In the older layers of the MaiU, we find a verbal or mental, inner ritual similar to that of the TU (3d). This ritual aims at "throwing up" the sacrificer to Brahman, which appears to be located above the three worlds. In the later parts of the texts, this sacrificer becomes a yogin, and the original teaching based on ritual is reinterpreted and continued in a new way.

Many of these connections have been recognized before. What I have tried to show is that they can indeed be very loose: there is no one pattern in which the ritual is reused, but rather, many. Also, the fact the ritual was, in practice, very different from self-knowledge or yoga shows that the former did not impose any restrictions on this reuse. Authors of several texts from different periods found it advisable to tie up their teachings with the famous Vedic ritual.

In view of this specific development, it can be assumed that also in the KU, the Agnicayana is taught essentially in the sense of the (re-)interpretation and reuse developed in the old and middle Upaniṣads. Although it is said that Death teaches Naciketas 'which bricks and how (they are to be laid)' (KU 1.15), the focus of the text is on that which makes the Agnicayana effective, namely the *knowledge of its meaning* or the realization of the mystical correspondences underlying it.

However, to the chagrin of scholars living some two millennia later, the authors did not stop at this. Especially in the 3rd, 5th and 6th Vallī there are also instructions which go beyond ritual, mere knowledge of the self and the renunciation of worldly evils. The first verses of this kind can be found in the 3rd Vallī, which for the most part revolves around the parable of the carriage; in the 6th Vallī the subject is dealt with again in a very similar form. In both sections there are references to practices that belong to yoga; in particular, the restraint of the senses is emphasized. The goal of these practices is characterized by a certain contradictoriness: on the one hand, the

individual self is liberated from its individuality by yoga—after all, the *one* self common to all beings is to be recognized; on the other hand, as in the Nāciketacayana, there is mention of reaching a heavenly sphere.

The common intersection of the two paths to salvation is obvious: the individual self was the central object of speculation and cognition already in some parts of the ŚB and in the early Upaniṣads, which are still firmly anchored in the language and worldview of the ritual. This speculation was always also conducted with the aim of clarifying the relation between self and mortality, and the knowledge of the essence of the self was often understood as a means to its immortalization.

Whilst the practical relationship between ritual and knowledge is not always clear, it cannot be denied that the performance of physical ritual became less and less important for those who were intent on finding the true self. The techniques of yoga, which are explained in the KU only very elliptically and are not further elaborated, could be understood to be an answer to the question about the *method* for self-knowledge. The self, which is taught in the sacrificial mysticism of the Agnicayana, in the Upaniṣadic doctrine of knowledge, and finally also in yoga, has many faces, but in the end, it is one and the same. The abandonment of outer and material things, which already in the first Vallī dull or ‘wear off the shine/sharpness of all senses’ (*sarvendriyāṇām jarayanti tejah*, KU 1.26), finds its logical consequence in yoga, which serves to tame the senses.

But how could those who first heard the text in the same or similar form as we have it today harmonize the different aims of ritual, self-knowledge and yoga? Did they regard all of them as leading to the same goal? In the following, I want to show how the KU might have been understood by its first transmitters, redactors, and recipients by re-evaluating the various descriptions of the salvation goal(s) in the text.

Heaven, Liberation and the World of Brahman

Salvation in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Taking a closer look at how the salvation taught in KU is characterized, one can see that it is often described in very similar words. Most often it is designated as (post-mortal) immortality (*amṛta*).⁷⁶ In different formulations this goal can be discovered throughout the whole text.⁷⁷ It is also consistently said that by achieving the final goal one is freed from sorrow and pain⁷⁸ and experiences happiness, joy and

⁷⁶ Cf. Collins (1992, p. 224): “The word normally translated ‘immortality,’ *amṛtam*, in its earliest occurrences meant simply ‘non-dying,’ in the sense of continuing life; thus it was no paradox for Vedic hymns to aspire to the possession of *amṛtam* as a ‘full life’ (*sarvam āyuh*) lasting one hundred years.” Only in later times was this extended to the continuation of life after death. KU 1.17–18 and Naciketas’s contrasting of the agelessness of the gods and a full life on this earth in 1.27–28 show that here the latter conception is in effect.

⁷⁷ 1.12 (*na tatra tvam* [= Death]); 1.13 (*svargalokā amṛtatvaṃ bhajante*); 1.18 (*sa mṛtyupāśān purataḥ praṇodya*); 3.15 (*mṛtyumukhāt pramucyate*); 4.1 (*amṛtatvaṃ icchan*); 4.2 (*dhīrā amṛtatvaṃ veditvā*); 5.8, 6.1 (*tad eva śukraṃ tad brahma tad evāmṛtam ucyate*) with reference to the Ātman and the *aśvattha*; 6.9 (*ya etad vidur amṛtās te bhavanti*); 6.14, 6.15 (*atha martyo ’mrto bhavati*); 6.16 (*amṛtatvaṃ eti*); 6.18 (*brahmaprāpto virajo ’bhūd vimṛtyuh*); 6.17 (*taṃ vidyāc chukram amṛtam*) with reference to Puruṣa. In

peace.⁷⁹ The overcoming of rebirth (and of redeath) is ubiquitous;⁸⁰ however, the verb *muc* ‘to lose, to be liberated,’ which is important in this context, is not used in the 1st, 2nd and 4th Vallī⁸¹ and *saṃsāra*, the ‘wandering about’ in the cycle of existences, is only once mentioned in 3.7.

Other statements, too, are limited to certain sections of the text. The World of Heaven is explicitly mentioned only in the 1st Vallī, while in the 3rd we find just the ‘highest remote region’ (*parama parārdha*), which presumably is identical with heaven, and the ‘highest place of Viṣṇu.’⁸² The World of Brahman can only be found in the inserted excursus about the syllable Om, in the equally late final verse of the 3rd Vallī, and in the 6th Vallī, where its position is difficult to ascertain.⁸³ Brahman itself is not mentioned in the 1st, 2nd and 4th Vallīs.⁸⁴

What conclusions can be drawn from this evidence? Most importantly, it can be observed that the overcoming of rebirth and death (either by means of the ritual or of yoga) is also associated with a “place” or “region” (*loka, pada*). This place is identified as (a kind of) heaven in 1.12, 1.18 and 3.9; in the last case, it is even the result of yogic practice.⁸⁵ But can all of these places be regarded as one and the same? While the very existence of various words suggests the existence of disparate notions, in the following I will show that for the first recipients of the KU it was indeed possible to blend them together into a single conception.

The Blending of Concepts

The idea that being in the *svarga* represents an impermanent state is prominent in the Brāhmaṇas, which often deal with the possibility of avoiding redeath

Footnote 77 continued

the second Vallī, immortality is implicit: 2.6 (*ayaṃ loko nāsti para iti mānī punaḥ punar vaśam āpadyate me* [= Death]); 2.18 (*na jāyate mriyate vā vipaścīn*); 2.19 (*nāyaṃ hanti na hanyate*).

⁷⁸ 1.12, 1.18 (*śokātigo modate svargaloke*); 2.12 (*harṣaśokau jahāti*); 2.22, 4.4, 5.1, 6.6 (*dhīro na śocati*). The 3rd Vallī is dominated by the parable of the carriage, which does not mention sorrowlessness.

⁷⁹ 1.12, 1.18 (*śokātigo modate svargaloke*); 1.17 (*śāntim atyantam eti*); 2.13 (*sa modate modanīyaṃ hi labdhvā*); 5.12 (*sukhaṃ śāśvatam*); 5.14 (*anirdeśyaṃ paramaṃ sukham*); 5.13 (*śāntiḥ śāsvati*). The word *sukha* ‘happiness’ is thus limited to the 5th Vallī.

⁸⁰ 1.17 (*tarati janmamṛtyū*); 2.6 (*ayaṃ loko nāsti para iti mānī punaḥ punar vaśam āpadyate me*); (2.18 [*na jāyate mriyate vā vipaścīn*]); 3.8 (*tat padam āpnoti yasmād bhūyo na jāyate*).

⁸¹ 3.15 (*mṛtyumukhāt pramucyate*); 5.1 (*vimuktaś ca vimucyate*); 5.4 (*dehinaḥ / dehāḥ vimucyamānasya*); 6.8 (*yaṃ jñātvā mucyate jantur amṛtatvaṃ ca gacchati*); (6.14 [*yaḍā sarve pramucyante kāmāḥ*]).

⁸² 1.12 (*svarge loka na bhayaṃ kiṃcana*); 1.12, 1.18 (*śokātigo modate svargaloke*); 3.1 (*guhāṃ praviṣṭau parame parārdhe*); 3.9 (*so 'dhvanaḥ pāram āpnoti tad viṣṇoḥ paramaṃ padam*).

⁸³ 2.17, 3.16 (*brahmaloke mahīyate*); 6.5 (*chāyātapayor iva brahmaloke*).

⁸⁴ 3.2 (*akṣaraṃ brahma yat param*); 5.8, 6.1 (*tad eva śukraṃ tad brahma tad evāmṛtam ucyate*) with reference to the Ātman and the *āsvattha*; 6.14 (*atra brahma samaśnute*); 6.18 (*brahmaprāpto virajo 'bhūd vimṛtyuḥ*).

⁸⁵ Regarding the highest place of Viṣṇu and its connection to the Agni(-Cayana), Oberlies (1988, pp. 39–40) remarks: “Es darf vermutet werden, daß der Yogin (vgl. KU 3.3–8) Viṣṇus Stätte, deren Lokalisierung im höchsten Himmel eng mit dem Mythos der drei Schritte Viṣṇus verbunden ist, auf Agni als *vāhana* erreicht. Dadurch werden—zumindest von den Redaktoren der KU—der Yogin und der Altar-Schichtende, der ja auch auf dem Nāciketa-Feuer *svarga* (= *viṣṇuloka*) erreicht, in unmittelbare Nähe zueinander gerückt.”

(*punarmṛtyu*). The usual case in later literature is, of course, that heaven is contrasted with final liberation—which is eternal—by the proponents of the latter. As mentioned above, to counteract their criticism the proponents of Vedic ritual often proclaimed that it indeed has the power to keep the sacrificer in heaven, i.e., to let him enjoy immortality *forever*. In the KU, which builds on the conceptions of the Brāhmaṇas, heaven is also looked upon as an endless world.⁸⁶ It is even stated that whoever carries out the Nāciketaçayana overcomes birth and death (*tarati janmamṛtyū*, 1.17). How this is to be understood is difficult to determine; the evidence of the conception of the cycle of rebirth underlying the teaching of the KU is scattered throughout the text. In order to clarify how liberation is conceived of in the KU, in the following I will examine the few verses that give us some indications on the subject.

In 1.6, man is likened to grain:

KU 1.6⁸⁷

Look ahead!—like the previous ones—look back!—so will be the later ones.
A mortal man ripens like grain; like grain he is born again.

The conception in effect here probably is that of the old Upaniṣads: the imagery employed may refer to the idea that humans are first transferred from the upper regions to earth by means of raindrops, which here are symbolized by seeds of grain. Just like the seeds are ‘sown’ on the earth and then start to grow upright, so human beings come down to earth in the myriads of raindrops only to ripen again.

Verse 2.6 implies that this process is understood to happen again and again:

KU 2.6⁸⁸

What comes after death lies hidden from a careless fool, who is deluded by the delusion of wealth. Thinking ‘This is the world; there is no other,’ he falls into my power again and again.

However, to the greater part of the text the conception of Saṃsāra, one of the most important characteristics of which is endless and distressful *repetitiveness*, is alien or at least irrelevant.

The theory of *karman*, too, is only referenced in two verses:

KU 5.6–7⁸⁹

Come, I’ll tell you this secret and eternal formulation of truth (*brahman*); and what the self becomes, Gautama, when it encounters death. /6/ Some selves

⁸⁶ Cf. KU 1.14 (the Agni is *anantalokāpti*, it ‘leads to the attainment of an endless world’), 1.17 (it leads to unending peace) and 3.2 (the Nāciketa ritual is identified with the *akṣara brahman*). Cf. also Kena Upaniṣad (KeU) IV .9: ‘When someone knows this (*upaniṣad*, scil. the teaching of ‘correspondences’ presented in the text) in this way, having warded off evil, he becomes firmly established in the endless heavenly world that cannot be overpowered.’ (*yo vā etām evaṃ vedāpapatya pāpmānam anante svarge loka jyeṣṭhe pratitiṣṭhati pratitiṣṭhati* |).

⁸⁷ *anupaśya yathā pūrve pratipaśya tathāpare / sasyam iva martyaḥ pacyate saysam ivājāyate punaḥ /6/.*

⁸⁸ *na sāmparāyaḥ pratibhāti bālaṃ pramādyantaṃ vittamohena mūḍham / ayaṃ loko nāsti para iti mānī punaḥ punar vaśam āpadyate me /6/.* Tr. by Olivelle (1998, p. 283), modified. For the translation of *sāmparāya*, see Haas (2018, pp. 138–143).

⁸⁹ *hanta ta idaṃ pravakṣyāmi guhyaṃ brahma sanātanam / yathā ca maraṇaṃ prāpya ātmā bhavati gautama /6/ yonim anye prapadyante śarīratvāya dehinaḥ / sthānumanye ’nusaṃnyanti yathākarma yathāśrutam /7/.*

(*dehinaḥ*) enter a womb to be embodied, others pass into a stationary thing—according to (their) deeds (*karman*), according to (their) knowledge (*śruta*). /7/

Similar to the early Upaniṣads, this explanation looks like a foreign addition to an otherwise naturalistic rebirth cosmology,⁹⁰ and a full-fledged Saṃsāra should not be assumed in the KU only because of this passage.

Despite the fact that it is a *loka*, the final goal of the Upaniṣad—even if it is explicitly achieved via *mukti* or *mokṣa*—is characterized as a release from ageing, dying and being born again. This wording may indicate that the goal of the ritual is very similar to the famous World of Brahman, which otherwise does not feature prominently in the text.⁹¹ If the cycle of rebirth in the KU is similar to that described in texts where the World of Brahman is the result of liberation, it is very likely that the salvation goal of the KU is conceptually similar to this world, even if it may not bear the same name. In the following, I will corroborate my thesis that the creators of the KU really did have the *brahmaloka* (or a world very similar to it) in mind when they set about to upgrade the goal of the Nāciketacayana (*svarga*) by discussing several passages where a similar “merger of worlds” or blending of concepts took place.

First of all, the KU itself offers some interesting insights on this topic at the beginning of the 3rd Vallī:

KU 3.1–2⁹²

Knowers of Brahman, men with five fires, and with the three Agnis of Naciketas—they call these two “Shadow” and “Light,” the two who have entered—the one into the cave of the heart, the other into the highest region beyond, both drinking the truth in the World of Rituals rightly performed.⁹³ /1/ May we master the fire-altar of Naciketas, a dike for those who have sacrificed; the imperishable, the highest Brahman,⁹⁴ the farther shore for those who wish to cross the danger. /2/

Obviously, the world gained by ritual—*svarga*, or here: the *sukṛtasya loka*—is also reached by someone who or something which ‘has entered the cave’ of the heart. This cave, as we know, is inhabited by the Ātman. As the other verses of the Upaniṣad make clear, the most important fact about the Ātman is that it can be known, and that this knowledge entails a salvific effect. Even though the import of these verses is by no means absolutely clear, there can be little doubt that they imply

⁹⁰ Cf. Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 112–126).

⁹¹ Its mentions in 2.17 and 3.16, which are definitely late additions, do not concern the ritual.

⁹² *ṛtaṃ pibantau sukṛtasya loke guhām praviṣṭau parame parārdhe / chāyātapau brahmavidō vadanti pañcāgnayo ye ca triñāciketāḥ /1/ yaḥ setur iñānām akṣaram brahma yat param / abhayaṃ tītṛṣatām pāraṃ nāciketam śakemahi /2/.*

⁹³ The significance of *chāyā* and *ātapa* is not clear, and I can only offer a somewhat bold interpretation. The two terms may refer to two types of Ātman, viz. the first one, which has entered the sun (*ātapa*, actually its ‘blazing heat’) in the highest heaven. The other one may not be a ‘shadow’ (*chāyā*), but a ‘reflection’ of the solar self within the cave of the heart.

⁹⁴ In these verses, the Agnicayana is itself identified with Brahman. Probably the cause—the ritual—was metonymically transferred to the effect—the Brahman; cf. Alsdorf (1950, p. 633). Alsdorf, however, thinks that both verses are interpolations of a later ritualist.

that delving into the Ātman eventually leads to the *sukṛtasya loka*, the alias of *svarga*.

The idea that knowledge (specifically about the self) leads to the attainment of a *loka*—usually, *brahmaloka*—can be found in numerous places. However, the *loka* gained by knowledge is sometimes even referred to as *svarga* in the older Upaniṣads.⁹⁵ In a poem of the BĀU (IV 4.8–21), for instance, it is clearly said that someone who knows the self and is released (*vimukta*)⁹⁶ goes to heaven (*svarga*):

BĀU IV 4.8⁹⁷

The fine path, extended and old, has touched me—I’ve discovered it! By it the wise men, the knowers of Brahman, go to the heavenly world (*svarga loka*), upwards from here, released.

Thus, self-knowledge may even lead to the attainment of heaven. More often, however, the goal is called *brahmaloka*. In the ChU, the ‘dike’ (which in KU 3.1–2 is the Agni)⁹⁸ is identified with the Ātman and explained as being the border to the ever-bright World of Brahman:

ChU VIII 4.1–3⁹⁹

Now, this self is a dike, a divider, to keep these worlds from colliding with each other. Days and nights **do not pass across** this dike, and neither does **old age, death, or sorrow**, or even good or bad deeds. All evil things turn back from it, for this World of Brahman is free from evil things. [...] ||| Upon passing across this dike, therefore, one even passes from night into day, for, indeed, this World of Brahman is lit up once and for all. ||2|

The World of Brahman described here is an area of existence, a world or a ‘space’ (*loka*) in which the individual can stay forever. As can be concluded from the descriptions of the self and its journeys, this usually implies a disembodied but individual existence, a conception that is also prevalent in the KU. In the KU, the idea that the individual dissolves in Brahman is nowhere expressed, the only exception being the verses 4.14–15, where it is stated that the self becomes like water poured into water.¹⁰⁰ Apart from these two verses, however, even though the

⁹⁵ Cf. ChU VIII 3.3, AiU III 4, KeU IV 9.

⁹⁶ The release mentioned in the text in all likelihood is not from Samsāra, but from the more naturalistic cycle of rebirths.

⁹⁷ *aṅuḥ panthā vitataḥ purāṇo, māṃ spr̥ṣṭo ’nuvīto mayaiva / tena dhūrā apiyanti brahmavidāḥ, svargam lokam ita ūrdhvaṃ vimuktāḥ //.*

⁹⁸ In the Kāthaka Samhitā (40.12: 147.1–2), the dike is Agni, too, cf. Oberlies (1988, p. 38).

⁹⁹ *atha ya ātmā sa setur dhṛtir eṣāṃ lokānām asaṃbhedāya | naitaṃ setum ahorātre tarato na jarā na mṛtyur na śoko na sukṛtaṃ na duṣkṛtam | sarve pāpmāno ’to nivartante | apahatapāpmā hy eṣa brahmalokaḥ |1| [...] tasmād vā etaṃ setuṃ tīrtvāpi naktam ahar evābhiniṣpadyate | sakṛd vibhāto hy evaiṣa brahmalokaḥ |2|. Tr. by Olivelle (1998, p. 277), slightly modified.*

¹⁰⁰ In general, the overcoming of the redeath (in heaven or another *loka*) and the dissolution of the individual in a highest entity are clearly distinguished from each other; cf. Bodewitz (1996, pp. 596–597). Accordingly, Bodewitz (1985, p. 6) speculates about the meaning of Naciketas’s question: “Perhaps we have to interpret [the third question] as referring to the exact nature of the escape from *punarṁṛtyu* (the obsession of the Brāhmaṇas) and from *punarjanman* (the Upaniṣadic ideal); i. e. Naciketas asks whether one eternally lives on after death (the old Vedic ideal) or loses one’s identity through absorption into a

Ātman of every human being is essentially the same, it usually (at least in expression) maintains its integrity. The ideology of the text is clear: if you know your immortal self, it will advance to an immortal sphere, just as it does according to the text passages from the BĀU and the ChU translated above.

Given the fact that the ChU and KU both seem to share the naturalistic concept of rebirth and describe their goals using very similar wording, I venture to draw the conclusion that the goal of the Nāciketacayana, *svarga*, is *conceptually*—i.e., in the minds of the authors and their audience—identical with the *brahmaloka* of the ChU. Leaving aside the fact that some (in all probability later) verses of the KU do actually call the goal of self-knowledge *brahmaloka*, the identification of *brahmaloka* and *svarga* also in the older parts of the text is not as far-fetched as it may seem: already before the KU, both have been known to be the result of self-knowledge, and both have been located in or above the sun-lit sky.¹⁰¹

The passages in the KU and in other Upaniṣads show that *svarga* did not simply remain as the old goal of ritual but that it could actually be “upgraded” to become the result of self-knowledge. From this, it is not a big step to equate it with liberation from rebirth and even Saṃsāra, as was obviously done. Contrary to other texts, the KU does not even once make the effort to highlight the differences in the plethora of its methods and teachings. Just as the Ātman (including the great Ātman which is God) essentially is one and the same, so too the goal of the ritual and the gnostic teaching belonging to it may be regarded as one and the same.

The Goal of Yoga

But what about the goal of yoga? Yoga is often understood as a method which aims at gaining absolute isolation (*kaivalya*) by withdrawing the senses and reabsorbing them into the inner self. The goal may thus be said to be beyond all types of *lokas*, which are most often regarded as parts of Saṃsāra and are therefore to be abandoned.

However, several well-known narrative passages in the Mahābhārata (MBh) indicate that the goal of yoga was not only thought of as an abstract state of being, but was actually imagined in a very vivid way.¹⁰² In these passages, yoga is depicted as a method which can transfer the soul of a dying person into the sun or to the body of another being. An excellent example for this kind of yoga is the report

Footnote 100 continued

highest principle or deity (the Upaniṣadic view).” In Vedic literature, however, there are also some hints to an intermediate stage between an individual existence in heaven and the dissolution in the highest principle, see Bodewitz (1996, pp. 597–598).

¹⁰¹ As is widely known, since the late Vedic times the World of Brahman is often said to be the highest among seven worlds, whereas the *svargaloka* only occupies the third position. However, since vagueness is a characteristic of the *loka* concept both in the Vedic and Epic literature (see Gonda 1966, pp. 109–111) and the KU is definitely not a text of definitions, this “mixing-up” of worlds might not have bothered the authors at all.

¹⁰² See White (2009a, b), and Brockington (2003, pp. 18–19; 2010) for more details. For a critical review of White 2009b, see Mallinson 2013 as well as Nicholson 2010.

of Droṇa, who ascended to heaven / the World of Brahman through the application of yoga:

MBh VII 165.39–42¹⁰³

Having resorted to yoga, that great ascetic who had become a light advanced to heaven [...] When he was gone, we had the impression of *two* suns (concentrated) in a single point, for the sky was filled with lights. And he entered the moon, which was shining like the sun, and in a twinkling, the light disappeared. When Droṇa had gone to the World of Brahman, there were cries of joy among the enraptured inhabitants of heaven [...] only we, five human beings, have seen how the great one who engaged in yoga went to the highest goal.

Elsewhere in the Epic, Bhūriśravas, an archer fighting on the side of the Kauravas, engages in an apparently meditative practice in order to enter the World of Brahman:

MBh VII 118.17c–18¹⁰⁴

Desiring to go to the World of Brahman, he offered his vital breaths into the vital breaths, focused his gaze on the sun and his calm mind on water,¹⁰⁵ and contemplating the great secret (*upaniṣad*) the sage became engaged in yoga.

Now it may rightfully be questioned whether these and other descriptions of the MBh can serve to explain the actual practice of yoga at all: in the end, the stories of the MBh are fictitious, even fantastic, and may just dramatize what was, in reality, a quite inner experience.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, there are various kinds of yoga methods: it is not entirely clear whether the practice of Droṇa and Bhūriśravas was the same as the yoga of the KU or the Mokṣadharmaparvan. It even appears that the word *yogayukta* ‘engaged in yoga’ and the phrase *yogam āsthāya* ‘having resorted to

¹⁰³ [...] *yogam āsthāya jyotirbhūto mahātāpāḥ | divam ākrāmad [...] |39| dvau sūryāv iti no buddhir āsīt tasmīns tathā gate | ekāgram iva cāsīt dhi jyotirbhiḥ pūritam nabhaḥ | samapadyata cārkābhe bhāradvājaniśākare |40| nimeṣamātreṇa ca taj jyotir antaradhīyata | āsīt kilakilāśabdah prahṛṣṭānām divaukasām | brahmalokaṃ gate drone [...] |41| vayam eva tadādrākṣma pañca mānuṣayonayah | yogayuktaṃ mahātmānaṃ gacchantam paramam gatim |42|*. For another translation, see White (2009a, p. 66, b, p. 69).

¹⁰⁴ *yīyāsūr brahmalokāya, prāṇān prāṇeṣv athājuhōt // sūrye cakṣuḥ samādhāya, prasannaṃ salile manaḥ | dhyāyan mahopaniṣadaṃ yogayukto 'bhavan muniḥ //*. For a very different translation, see White (2009b, p. 69).

¹⁰⁵ It is not clear what role *salila* ‘water, flood, surge’ plays in this context. Usually, *salila* refers to agitated water. However, several manuscripts used in the critical edition also read *prasanne* or *prasanna-salile* ‘on calm water’ (K₅, D₂, D₃, D₆, M₃, M₄ *prasanne*; K₂, Dn₁, D₅ *prasanna-*). Since probably no real body of water is meant, the *salila* must be imaginary, as the mention of *manas* ‘mind’ suggests (the sun, on the other hand, apparently is the real one, as Bhūriśravas can set his eye on it). As Kenji Takahashi pointed out to me (personal communication), this could mean that by contemplating something that is clear and calm, one can make the mind clear and calm. The text of the critical edition, however, implies that the mind is already calm when contemplating the *salila*, which—despite the more general meaning of the word—must obviously be a calm one in all readings.

¹⁰⁶ Thus, with regard to the passage translated above, Brockington (1998, p. 310) remarks that “it has been homologated with accounts of yogic experience in terms of incomparable radiance.” Cf. also Brockington (2003, pp. 18–19).

yoga' in many cases simply refers to the equanimity expected of a brave warrior in the face of death.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, it is rather striking how the destiny of dying warriors—entering heaven or becoming one with the sun—comes close to the *mokṣa* of yogins (who are not warriors), which in the MBh is sometimes described with similar imagery.¹⁰⁸ As has been noted by Brockington (2010, p. 23), this imagery partly goes back to the older Upaniṣadic worldview as described above. Considering the conceptualization of the salvation goal of the Nāciketacayana in the KU, it might be possible to go even further. In my view, the similarities between the world 'behind the sun' (*pāreṇādityām*, TB III 11.7.4) which is gained by ritual and the radiant *brahmalo*ka of the early Upaniṣads and the Epic yogins are great enough to conclude that the creators of the KU could take them to refer to one and the same sphere. While the imagery of light and radiance is certainly of great importance in the context of yoga, the very concrete descriptions given in the Upaniṣads¹⁰⁹ suggest that it was not (only) an inner vision, but a certain conception of the cosmos which was responsible for the vivid accounts of the Epic.

The KU is primarily concerned with the self and not with heaven or liberation, and its notions of yoga and yogic concepts are comparatively abstract and theoretical. However, as can be seen from other sources, both the authors and the audience had the possibility to actually imagine their practice in a very vivid (and definitely very appealing) way. Thus, whilst some certainly would have distinguished between the goals of ritual, self-knowledge and yoga, others could easily inter-relate them due to their similar imagery and could even consider them as identical.

Conclusions to the section "Heaven, Liberation and the World of Brahman"

As has been shown above, the different salvation concepts are much closer than they initially appear. If one assumes that the KU was compiled by intelligent authors and redactors, and that the heterogeneity of its teachings is not merely a by-product of tradition, the juxtaposition of the salvation goals represents a highly interesting event in the religious history of South Asia. Not only does the KU belong among the earliest texts teaching the method of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, but it actually connects the method with the (late) Vedic soteriology, which aims at securing for the patron of the sacrifice a life after death in heaven or behind the sun.

What remains open, however, is what role the Nāciketacayana played in the religious practice of those who devised the text. Since the powers of knowledge and also of renunciation are clearly in the foreground, it is highly probable that these methods were not only understood as a *supplement* of the ritual, but that they—at least in practice—actually *replaced* it. That these two paths are not explicitly harmonized in the text does not show that their different origins were not

¹⁰⁷ See Brockington (2010, pp. 30–31).

¹⁰⁸ Brockington (2010, pp. 28–29). A good example can be found in MBh XII 193.17–19; for an annotated translation, see Takahashi (2019, p. 442).

¹⁰⁹ Cf., for example, Frauwallner (1926, pp. 6–9).

recognized; rather, it may have been intentionally ‘swept under the carpet’ to present the connection of both traditions as self-evident and natural.

In view of the fact that the KU at no point gives any hint to its being anti-ritualistic in terms of ideology, and nowhere indicates that rituals are to be given up, it cannot be said to be an anti-ritualistic text.¹¹⁰ The creators of the text were conscious of the symbolism of the Agnicayana and its attached importance, and nowhere indicate that it is a bad practice which leads to undesirable results; rather, they even endeavor to link it with certain concepts of the ritual in order to create a framework for its new teaching. Further, the fact that Naciketas in both versions explicitly asks for a ritual that is named after him indicates at least *prima facie* that the literary figure of Naciketas was not employed to criticize the effectiveness of ritual.

Being deeply rooted in the early Upaniṣadic worldview, the KU tries to integrate a variety of concepts by avoiding any mention of differences between those it joins under its umbrella. The only difference between the goal of ritual and that of self-knowledge/yoga may be that knowledge of the Ātman/Brahman not only leads to immortality, but even to supreme bliss. Johnston (1939, p. 124) points out that

[t]he argument of the first *adhyāya* [is] that *svarga*, the reward of carrying out the Vedic ceremonies, is not the final goal, but merely a superior stage from which the supreme bliss [*ānanda*] is absent. The happiness of heaven, as [KU 1.12] says, consists in freedom from fear, particularly the fear of old age and death, and in release from hunger, thirst and grief.

Like many others, Johnston assumes a single dichotomy in the text: on the one hand, there is the ritual which in essence is to be connected with pleasures;¹¹¹ on the other hand, we have the way of knowledge (and later, yoga) leading to supreme bliss. This, however, is a simplification which cannot be proven by the text: if the Nāciketacayana would have procured for Naciketas the pleasures of this world, it would not make sense to dissuade him from his third question by offering the very enjoyments he just obtained (1.23–25). If, on the other hand, the ritual only and primarily leads to the existence in an immortal sphere *after death* (as apparently is the case in the description of the KU), Death’s offerings are much more reasonable.

KU 1.28 makes clear that transient pleasures are worthless for somebody who, like Naciketas, has attained (*upa+i*) the freedom of old age which the gods enjoy in heaven (1.8). Therefore, he attempts to bind Naciketas, who will only be immortal after death, to this-worldly enjoyments. He does so in order to prevent him from

¹¹⁰ The term *kratu* (in *akratu*), which is used in 2.11 and 2.20 is often taken to refer to ‘ritual,’ can also mean ‘desire,’ and is probably used in this meaning also in the KU; cf. also Oberlies (1996, p. 152), n. 157. Both verses, which cannot be discussed here, therefore refer to the abandonment or absence of desires and pleasures. As the first two Vallīs make clear, this (and not the devaluation of ritual) is one of the main themes of the text. Oberlies (1988, p. 37, n. 13) notes that ritual generally is not devaluated in the Upaniṣads of the Yajur Veda (unlike, for instance, in the PU and MuU belonging to the Atharva Veda).

¹¹¹ A view most clearly expressed by Geldner (1901, p. 154, n. 1): “Im zweiten Vara erbittet Naciketas die Mitteilung des zum Himmel führenden Feuers (13). Er steht hier also noch ganz auf dem Boden des Karmakāṇḍa, dessen höchsten Ziele die Himmelsgenüsse sind.” The view is also shared by Charpentier (1928, p. 206).

pursuing a much more effective knowledge even in this life: the various instances where the result of self-knowledge or yoga is described in the present tense obviously imply a salvific practice and goal even in this current life. This, again, may have been a reaction to other forms of spirituality; as is well known, in Buddhism, reaching Nirvāṇa *immediately* leads to an experience of happiness and bliss. Although it would indeed make sense that the authors of the text also viewed the *final result* of their way of knowledge—which is characterized both by immortality and bliss—as superior, I would rather argue that their main aim was to propagate their new *method* which is based on *knowledge*.

Almost a century ago Barend Faddegon (1923) argued that it may be unwise to demand great consistency from the KU. He pointed out that the text is highly honored in India and that it is a shortcoming of “Western” interpreters that they are unable to appreciate its approach. For him, the KU basically is a fairytale, and its naive attempt to connect ritual and mysticism should not be criticized too severely. He concludes his defense of the text thus: ‘In a word, whoever wants to appreciate the poets of the Upaniṣads, must be able to be for a while—simple in spirit.’¹¹²

Without insinuating mere stupidity on the part of the authors, I think that Faddegon’s statement contains a grain of truth. In the eyes of the authors and their audience, who may not have been as inclined to philosophical scrutiny as later commentators and modern researchers, the differences between *svarga*, *brahmaloka* and liberation from rebirth may in fact have been secondary in terms of the concepts they represent. This is not to say that they were incapable of distinguishing between ritual, self-knowledge and yoga, or between heaven, the realm of Brahman and liberation. What counts is that it was at least possible that these could, in one way or another, be connected with each other. The differences may have been far less important than the fact that a new doctrine or technique could somehow be related to an existing Brahmin narrative. To them, the KU taught a new way to achieve a goal which is presented as having been part of the Vedic tradition since the days of yore, a secret knowledge which is actually as effective as the great Agnicayana.

The underlying assumption here is, of course, that there can be only one highest goal which—thanks to Naciketas’s curiosity—must no longer be reached by carrying out any physical ritual. While the ritual, in a very elaborate manner created a new body for a human being after death, the realization of the immortal self not only leads to the same goal, but alleviates the agonies of daily existence already in this life. The fact that this self does not need to be *constructed*, but has already been within and actually only needs to be *discovered* with the help of the Upaniṣad (and a Brahmin teaching it), definitely suggested that this was the superior means to immortality and happiness. In addition, this method was much cheaper—as Frederick M. Smith (1988) has shown, the ever-growing costs in the financing of Śrauta-rituals eventually affected ritual itself and, over the course of time, even led to its nearly complete disappearance.

Since Naciketas is a fictitious character designed to act in the way the authors wanted him to, it is advisable to interpret his actions against the background of *their*

¹¹² Tr. of Faddegon (1923, p. 18): “In één woord, wie de dichters der Upaniṣads wil kunnen waardeeren, moet voor een wjl kunnen zijn—eenvoudig van geest.”

thoughts and worldview. His third wish may thus be simply understood as a manifestation of the general maxim of Upaniṣadic literature, namely that knowledge is power.¹¹³ Naciketas, being aware that he—as opposed to most others—is now immortal and assuming that there is more on the subject, wants to know everything about it.¹¹⁴ This does not imply that the object of his enquiry is in any way opposed to the ritual he has just been taught. As Naciketas points out, Death's attempts at distracting him are rather futile, for he has just been made immortal anyway.¹¹⁵ The reason for his asking is not to be found in any lack of the Nāciketacayana. Rather, it must be understood as a clever device of the story-maker(s), who in this way could show that the knowledge about the immortal self actually comes from Death himself. For the unprejudiced reader, the fact that (as in the TB) the third wish does not supersede the second need not be a surprise.

Concluding Remarks

As I have endeavored to show, the KU represents an attempt to homologize and syncretize various religious terminologies and approaches rather than to devalue or overcome an outdated salvation goal. This is accomplished by redefining several crucial concepts which would otherwise be in stark contrast:

1. The Agnicayana, a powerful ritual that was known to effectuate infinite immortality after death, is intimately linked to a method of self-knowledge; it is even said to be the self itself. While formerly this self was constructed in the ritual, it now can be recognized by those who have the right knowledge.
2. The goal of the ritual, *svarga*, is (re-)defined as leading to freedom from rebirth and redeath and as such corresponds to the salvation goal (often called *brahmaloka*) which is presented in other texts as the result of a gnostic method that is otherwise often opposed to ritual activity.
3. The techniques of yoga are integrated into the text as a means to accomplish self-knowledge and in practice replaced the expensive ritual.

The lack of consistency in this piling of concepts indicates that it was method which was most important. By evoking the story of pious Naciketas, who since the TB has been known for scolding his father for not performing his ritual properly, all teachings of the text are brought into the Vedic fold. The fact that ritual eventually becomes unimportant in practice was of little interest to the authors, who primarily tried to show that their teaching complies with Vedic tradition. It is precisely the absence of any problematization (which would otherwise be expected in such a text) that proves what the authors tried to represent as self-evident and given.

¹¹³ Cf. Edgerton (1929).

¹¹⁴ Remember that in 1.14 Death mysteriously hinted at the Agni in the heart, the place where Naciketas (and the audience of the text) must have expected the Ātman.

¹¹⁵ In fact, the text only says that if someone 'has obtained the agelessness of the immortals' (*ajīryatām amṛtānām upetya*), there is no sense in wishing for a long life (1.28). However, I presume that Naciketas is implying himself and that he may even be making fun of Death's offerings.

The framework narrative clearly demonstrates that it was Brahmins who were responsible for this project. Their reasons for creating the KU can only be speculated upon. Obviously, the practitioner of the KU is not in need of a Brahmin priest in order to gain salvation. This, however, did not necessarily remove the Brahmins from their status, because—whether as sacrificial priests or yoga teachers—the assimilation of non-Vedic elements confirmed their necessity as knowledge mediators.¹¹⁶

Primary Literature and Abbreviations

I have used Olivelle's (1998) edition of the Upaniṣads, Oberlies's (1995/96/98) edition of the ŚU, van Buitenen's (1962) edition of the MaiU, Weber's editions of the ŚB (1855) and TS (1871), Dumont's edition of the TB (1948–1969, published in several parts in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*), and the Pune edition of the MBh (1927–1966).

AiU	Aitareya Upaniṣad
BĀU	Bṛhad Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad
ChU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
JIP	<i>Journal of Indian Philosophy</i>
MāU	Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
MaiU	Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad
MuU	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
MBh	Mahābhārata
KauU	Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad
KeU	Kena Upaniṣad
KU	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
PU	Praśna Upaniṣad
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
SBE	<i>Sacred Books of the East</i>
ŚU	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
TB	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
tr.	translation
TS	Taittirīya Saṃhitā
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad
WZKS	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

¹¹⁶ Cf. Rawson (1934, p. 62): "To some extent [...] the *Kaṭha* may be regarded as a piece of Brahmin propaganda. It represents the supreme knowledge of the *Ātman* as having been divinely revealed to a Brahmin, whereas the older Upaniṣads represent this knowledge as first attained by Kṣatriyas and communicated by them to Brahmins." Furthermore, the story also shows what status the Brahmins wanted to confer on themselves.

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