

The Vitalistic Antecedents of the Ātman-Brahman Concept

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The classical literature of the Vedānta *darśana* employs the terms *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* to characterize the nature of ultimate reality (*ātman-Brahman*), though such descriptions, as Deutsch points out, "... are not so much qualifying attributes of Brahman as they are the terms that express the apprehension of Brahman by man."¹ The classical Vedānta teachers such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are also insistent that the vitalistic principle (*prāṇa*) is merely a phenomenal rather than an ultimate reality.² At the same time, these teachers maintain that their views are nothing more than interpretations of the Vedāntic scriptures, primarily the *Upaniṣads*. In what follows I shall seek to demonstrate that the views of both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are, in most cases, misinterpretations of the relevant *Upaniṣads* by (a) showing that in many *Upaniṣads*, *prāṇa* is regarded as an ultimate reality and (b) indicating how *Upaniṣadic* conceptions of *ātman* and *brahman* frequently incorporated features that were originally employed to characterize *prāṇa*.

Pre-*Upaniṣadic* Concepts of *Prāṇa*

The recognition of *prāṇa* as an ultimate principle actually pre-dates the *Upaniṣads*. In the *Atharva Veda* (11.4) *prāṇa* is described as the ultimate source, ground and controller of all. This hymn, according to A. H. Ewing, presents us with 'the highest meaning of *prāṇa*,' with *prāṇa* as the 'primeval cosmic principle.'³ The passages where this primeval status is most clearly established are:

Vs 1 Homage to *prāṇa* in whose control is this all, who hath been
lord of all, in whom all stand firm.

- Vs 10 Breath (*prāṇa*) clothes (*anu-vas*) human beings (*praja*) as a father clothes a dear son; breath is lord of all, both what breathes and what does not.
- Vs 12 Breath is Virāj, breath is the directress, breath all worship, breath is the sun, the moon; breath they call Prajāpati.
- Vs 15 Breath they call Mātariśvan; breath is called the wind; in breath what has been and what will be, in breath is all established (*pratiṣṭhita*).⁴

That the conception of *prāṇa* set out above was held by a number of Vedic teachers, is evident from an examination of later texts such as the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. The first of these contains five component *Āraṇyakas*, the second of which divides naturally into two parts. Part one (*adhyāyhas* 1–3) deals with the *uktha* (the high chant of the *Rgveda*) whilst part two constitutes what is more generally known as the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*. The material dealing with *prāṇa* is found almost entirely in part one.

To understand the views about *prāṇa* that are held by the author of this text one needs to begin with the story of the faculties trying to determine which of them is the hymn (*uktha*), this being employed as a synonym for the supreme principle (2.1.4). Speech, sight, hearing and mind all quit the body but it only falls when the *prāṇa* departs. Similarly, each in turn returns to the body but only on the return of *prāṇa* is it re-animated. At this demonstration of the *prāṇa*'s supremacy the other faculties proclaim that:

...breath only is the hymn. Let men know that breath is the hymn. The gods said to breath, 'Thou art the hymn, thou art all this, we are thine, thou art ours.'⁵

The identity of *prāṇa* and *uktha* can then, presumably, be read back into 2.1.2, where it is said that all existence springs from the *uktha*.⁶ Certainly, the verses following 2.1.3 simply reiterate this view in a variety of ways, a reiteration that is continued throughout *adhyāyhas* 2 and 3.2.1.5 commences with the statement that, "The gods carried him forward."⁷ The most logical identity of 'him' is the *prāṇa-who-is-the-uktha* and this is confirmed by Sāyaṇa, the only traditional commentator to comment on the entire *Āraṇyaka*.⁸ Also, in 2.1.5 there is a distinction made between *prāṇa* and *apāna* and each is placed on a level with other faculties (speech, etc). So we read:

Day is breathing forth (*prāṇa*), night is breathing down (*apāna*). Speech is fire, sight yonder sun, mind the moon, hearing the quarters ...⁹

Then we are told that:

...this is the union of those sent forth.¹⁰

'Those sent forth' are obviously the faculties, speech, etc, which are regarded as the forms of deities residing in the body. "This," as Keith points out,¹¹ "is obscure" but a reasonable interpretation, given the context, would be that it is the *prāṇa*-which-is-the-*uktha*. *Prāṇa* and *apāna* would then simply be derivatives of this in the same way that speech etc, are.

In 2.1.6 we are again reminded of the ultimate nature of *prāṇa* when we are told that:

... all of this is covered by *prāṇa*. This ether is supported by *prāṇa* ...¹²

Such a power is obviously a creative force and the remainder of the *adhyāya* and the whole of the next are devoted to establishing a link between, if not the identity of, *prāṇa*, the cosmic *puruṣa* and Prajāpati. The powers of *prāṇa* (which is called 'this person' in 2.1.7 and 'he who shines' in 2.2.11) are that he creates earth, fire, sky, heaven, the sun, the quarters, the moon, the waters and Varuṇa (lord of the moral order (*ṛta*) and the deep water). Furthermore, he is, "all these verses, all these *Vedas*, all sounds (*ghoṣa*)..."¹³ a list which, presumably includes the thirty-six syllabled *bṛhati* metre, which is 'the whole self'.¹⁴ Finally, we may note that in 2.2.3 Indra tells Viśvamitra that he (Indra) is *prāṇa*, Viśvamitra is *prāṇa* and all creatures are *prāṇa*.

We can thus conclude that in this part of the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, the only part dealing at all comprehensively with the topic of *prāṇa*, the vital force is considered to be the source of all and the ground or being of all.

In *A.Ā.* 2.1.8 we are informed that it is knowledge of *prāṇa*, of how it functions and how it exists in the human body, 'the hiding place of brahman', that brings immortality. Why this should be so can be inferred from a study of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. In 1.4.3.8 there is a reference to the '*antasthā prāṇa*' (the middle or central *prāṇa*) which Ewing regards as synonymous with the '*madhyama prāṇa*' of the *Upaniṣads*.¹⁵ He also suggests that here the clear intention of the verse is to present *prāṇa* as 'the controlling influence', the 'Inner Ruler' which is 'an active, conscious, even Divine Force which dominates the entire organism'.¹⁶ Eggeling translates thus:

... what central breath [*antasthā prāṇa*] there is (in the body) ... that one indeed is the internal motive force of the breathings ... And whosoever knows that internal motive force of the breathings, him they regard as the internal motive force.¹⁷

If Ewing is correct then we have here a concept which is almost identical to the *Upaniṣadic antaryāmin* (inner controller). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* also equates *prāṇa* with the immortal element in man (*Ś.B.* 2.2.2.8-15; 10.2.6.18) and states that the *prāṇas*, which are 'the highest thing of all this universe' (8.7.4.21), are immortality (9.1.2.32). Mythically, this is presented in terms of the division of Prajāpati in *Ś.B.* 10.1.4.1:

Now at the beginning, Prajāpati was (composed of) both these, the mortal and immortal – his vital airs alone were immortal, his body mortal ...

Such a division is also reflected in the human being; hence Ś.B. 6.7.1.11 informs us that,

... that part of the vital air which is immortal is above the navel and streams out by upward breathing; but that which is mortal passes by and away from the navel ...

A crucial part of this knowledge of *prāṇa* is, as was noted above in connection with the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, that it exists in two principal modes, a unitary one, when it is the foundation of all existence and the inner controller of the individual, and diversified one, when it is the various cosmic forces and the breaths and faculties which exist in the body. Hence, 8.7.3.21 informs us that,

... this vital air [*prāṇa*] whilst being one only, extends over all the limbs, over the whole body,¹⁸

and 11.1.2.3 explains that:

... this sacrifice is the blowing (wind) [*vāyu = prāṇa*]: he blows, as it were, as a single one, but when he has entered into man he is divided into ten parts.¹⁹

Most statements about the number of *prāṇas* in the Ś.B. suggest that there are ten of them. However, some texts increase the number by varying amounts; hence we find references to eleven (8.4.3.8; 11.2.1.2), twelve (12.3.2.2) and thirteen (3.8.4.1).

The unified *prāṇa* enters the body by way of the head²⁰ and then spreads throughout, infusing every limb.²¹ In doing so it nourishes and vitalizes the body.²² Those parts not reached by the *prāṇa* dry up and wither away.²³ The distribution of *prāṇa* appears to be effected by means of definite pathways, though the text is not clear on this.

The vitalisation of the body appears to be the result of the activities of the five *prāṇas*: *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*. However, as was noted in connection with the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, the one *prāṇa* also manifests as the different sensory faculties. There are various lists of these in the Ś.B. The 'prāṇas in the head' or 'the *prāṇas* of Prajāpati' (7.5.2.6, 9.2.2.5 and 9.3.3.8) are mind (*manas*), eye (*cakṣus*), breath (*prāṇa*), ear (*śrotra*) and voice (*vāc*). The eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth are the seven *prāṇas* mentioned in 7.5.2.8–12 and the same list, with speech substituted for mouth, is found in 9.3.1.10–12. Hence, when *prāṇa* diversifies in the body it manifests as both vital forces (the five *prāṇas*) and perceptual faculties.

This is not all, for, as we might expect from the inclusion of *manas* among the list of *prāṇas*, *prāṇa* is also the source, if not the substance of mentation. Thus, "... *Savitṛ* is the mind and the thoughts are the vital airs ...",²⁴ and "... the divine inspirers doubtless are the vital airs, for these inspire all thoughts ...".²⁵

A similar sentiment is found in *A.Ā.* 2.3.5, where we are told that:

... the self that is speech is imperfect, since a man understands if driven to thought by breath (*prāṇa*), not if driven by speech.²⁶

Thus, in many parts of pre-*Upaniṣadic* Vedic literature the vitalistic principle, *prāṇa*, is presented as the self-existent source of everything, the ground or being of ephemeral mortal forms. It is diversified as *prāṇa*, *apāna*, etc., the perceptual faculties and, possibly, thoughts. One who knows this, who knows the deity, knows the supreme *prāṇa*, knows the immortal (which is the true essence of a person) and attains immortality. We have here, then, the same salvific scheme that dominates the *Upaniṣads*. At the heart of this scheme, however, resides the vital principle, the *prāṇa*, not *ātman* or Brahman.

Prāṇa as an ultimate principle in the *Upaniṣads*

An examination of all references to *prāṇa* in the *Upaniṣads* reveals that the prominent view is quite similar to that already outlined with regard to pre-*Upaniṣadic* literature: *prāṇa* is the primeval source of all and the immortal inner essence of individuals which manifests in the body as the various breaths (*apāna*, etc.) and faculties. In a number of instances this is presented in an unambiguous manner, in others, however, close analysis is required to demonstrate their espousal of such a view.

However, this is not the only view of *prāṇa* to be found in the *Upaniṣads*. In a number of places it is presented as what I shall call a cosmic principle, i.e. one which is derived from the fundamental principle but which itself is the source of further manifestations at the level of phenomenal or individualised existence. In yet other places we find accounts of *prāṇa* only as it appears at the phenomenal level. In some cases these could be taken to be statements about the phenomenal manifestation of a higher principle which is assumed but not referred to. In others, however, it is clear that the author(s) are operating with a different model of existence than that assumed in the passages referred to above and that, in these instances, *prāṇa* does not have the high status ascribed to it by the other accounts.

Clearly the characterisation of *prāṇa* as a cosmic or phenomenal principle by Vedāntins such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja can be supported by reference to the above-mentioned passages, e.g. *B.A.U.* 1.2; *C.U.* 1.1, 3.12–18 and 6; *T.U.* 1–3; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 4 and 5; *P.U.* 3; *Mait. U.* 2.6–7. Nevertheless, by far the most frequent way of presenting *prāṇa* in the *Upaniṣads* is as an ultimate principle. Many of these accounts are picked out for consideration by Bādarāyaṇa because of their ‘problematic’ nature (i.e. they present *prāṇa*, not *ātman* or Brahman, as the ultimate principle). His hermeneutical strategy in the *Brahmasūtra* is essentially designed to show

that *Upaniṣadic* teachers who presented *prāṇa* as the ultimate did not really mean what they said. In their own ways Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja echo this sentiment. My aim in this section is to demonstrate that Bādarāyaṇa, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and other Vedāntins who followed them have, in fact, distorted the message of the above-mentioned teachers.

Passages in the *Upaniṣads* where *prāṇa* is presented as an ultimate principle can be divided into two groups: straightforward and metaphorical. The straightforward passages are *B.A.U.* 1.6.1-3, 2.3.1-6, 3.9, 4.4.7 and 4.4.22; *C.U.* 3.15.4, 4.3.1-4, 4.10.4-5 and chapter 7; *P.U.* 2; *Muṇḍ. U.* 3.1.4 and *Kauṣ. U.* 4.20. The metaphorical passages are those which present the various faculties arguing about their respective status, particularly about which of them is supreme: *B.A.U.* 1.3, 1.5.22 and 6.1.1-14; *C.U.* 1.2.1-14 and 5.1.1-15; *Kauṣ. U.* 2.14 and 3.3, and *P.U.* 2.1-13. Of these *B.A.U.* 1.3 and *C.U.* 1.2.1-14 are versions of the same account. The same is true for *B.A.U.* 6.1.1-14 and *C.U.* 5.1.1-15.

Some of the straightforward passages offer simple statements about the ultimacy of *prāṇa*, e.g. *prāṇa* is everything (*C.U.* 3.15.4, *Kaṭh. U.* 2.3.2); *prāṇa* is Brahman (*C.U.* 4.10.4-5); *prāṇa* is the *ātman* (*Muṇḍ. U.* 3.14). Others develop related themes from different perspectives and these warrant more detailed discussion.

One theme is that of the two aspects of the ultimate: an unmanifest and a manifest; an immortal and a mortal; a mobile and an immobile; a transcendent and an existent; the one god and the many gods (*B.A.U.* 2.3.1-6, 3.9). In every case *prāṇa* is identified with the first item in each pair.

Another theme is that of the single source and the many manifestations. Thus, in *B.A.U.* 3.9, where it is stated that *prāṇa* is the one god (*eka deva*), we are told that the 33 gods are but manifestations of that one god and that the eleven Rudras are the ten *prāṇas* (*prāṇa, apāna, vyāna, udāna, samāna, vāc, cakṣus, śrotra, nāsā, manas?*) and *ātman* (here meaning body or, possibly, ego/ego/personality). *Ātman* (self) is declared to be none of these *prāṇas* (*neti, neti*). This latter *ātman* is obviously to be distinguished from the eleventh of the *prāṇas* and would thus seem to equate with the one god, the *prāṇa*, which has the *prāṇas* as its manifestations. Similarly, *B.A.U.* 4.3-4 equates *ātman*, Brahman and *prāṇa*. This *ātman*/Brahman/*prāṇa* is the light within the heart, abides in the space within the heart, is immortal, is the lord, controller and ruler of all, and is the one made of consciousness among the *prāṇas* (*vijñānamaya prāṇeṣu*). This *ātman*/Brahman/*prāṇa* has, as its manifestations, *vijñāna, manas, prāṇa, cakṣus, śrotra, pṛthivī, āpas, vāyu, ākāśa, tejas, atējas, kāma, akāma, krodha, akrodha, dharma, adharma* and everything (*sarvamaya*). The gods worship it as the light of lights (*jyotiṣām jyotiḥ*) and as life immortal (*āyuramṛta*).

The equation of *ātman*, Brahman and *prāṇa* can also be deduced from a consideration of verses which connect with *B.A.U.* 2.3.6, where it states that "... the *prāṇas* are truth and this (*eṣa*) is the truth of those (*teṣām*).” This *prāṇa* which is the truth of the truth is the person in the right eye, the

essence of the truth. In *B.A.U.* 2.1.20 *ātman* is described as the truth of truth (*satyasya satyam*) and in *C.U.* 4.15.1 as the person seen in the eye, who is without fear, immortal, Brahman.

The final passage presenting *prāṇa* as an ultimate principle that I will comment on is *C.U.* 7. This chapter does not, on the surface, present *prāṇa* as an ultimate principle for it distinguishes it from *ātman*. However, in my opinion this view has been redacted into an original account which presented *prāṇa* as the ultimate principle. The chapter deals with Sanatkumāra's instructions to Nārada on the progressive worship of Brahman. The teaching begins with the statement that worshipping Brahman as name (*nāma*) is quite legitimate. However, we are told that speech (*vāc*) is greater than name; in turn, mind (*manas*) is greater than speech; will (*saṃkalpa*) is greater than mind; thought (*citta*) is greater than will; contemplation (*dhyāna*) is greater than thought; understanding (*vijñāna*) is greater than contemplation; strength (*bala*) is greater than understanding; food (*anna*) is greater than strength; water (*ap*) is greater than food; heat (*tejas*) is greater than water; ether (*ākāśa*) is greater than heat; memory (*smara*) is greater than ether; hope (*āśā*) is greater than memory; breath/life (*prāṇa*) is greater than hope.

At this point the narrative changes. Whereas each of the preceding sections ended with the words "Venerable Sir, is there anything greater than ...? Yes, there is something greater than ... Do, Venerable Sir, tell me that ..." section 15, where it is stated that *prāṇa* is greater than *āśā*, ends with:

Prāṇa is all this. Verily, he who sees this, thinks this, understands this, becomes an excellent speaker [*atīvādīn*]. Even if people should say to him, 'you are an excellent speaker', he should not deny it.²⁷

The following section introduces a different kind of treatment, where concepts such as truth (*satya*), understanding (*vijñāna*) and faith (*śraddhā*) are described. It is clear that this set of verses forms part of a different analysis than that offered by the first set. Instead of commenting on the relative merits of the different concepts Sanatkumāra introduces them as being desirable to understand. Hence, each of the sections from sixteen to twenty-three, which introduces the concept of the infinite (*bhūma*), ends with the words "Venerable Sir, I desire to understand ...". The infinite is described in the following two verses, after which we read in 25.1, "Now next, the instruction with regard to the self-sense (*ahaṃkāra*)."²⁸ The following verse (25.2) introduces "the instruction in regard to the self (*ātman*)", which is described as being "this all". Then, in 26.1, we are told that *prāṇa* springs from the *ātman* (*ātmataḥ prāṇaḥ*), hope (*āśā*) springs from the self, memory springs from the self and so on back down the list in 7.1.3-15.

What is peculiar about 26.1 is that none of the qualities listed between 16.1 and 25.1 are mentioned as springing from the self. This creates a distinct sense of discontinuity. The continuity can be restored, however, by

taking 7.25.2 and 7.26.1 and placing them immediately after 7.15.4. In fact, this is what William Beidler does in his interpretation of this chapter though he does not indicate that he is doing so. The only problem with such a move is that 7.15.4 and 7.25.2 seem to contradict each other. The former states that *prāṇa* is everything (*prāṇa hy evaitāni sarvāṇi bhavati*); the latter makes an almost identical claim about *ātman* (*ātmaivedam sarvam iti*) whilst at the same time, in the next verse, stating that *prāṇa* is derived from the *ātman*. It is this incompatibility which, I would suggest, explains why 7.16–25 was interpolated at this point. If the redactor wanted to subordinate *prāṇa* to *ātman* it would be foolish for him simply to add 7.25.2 and 7.26.1 onto 7.15.4 for the incompatibility just discussed would be readily apparent. What better way to disguise it than by creating a break between the statement exalting *prāṇa* and that exalting *ātman*? If the interpolation could have a style which created the impression of continuity all the better. This, I would suggest, is exactly what we have here: an original text presenting *prāṇa* as the ultimate principle which has been modified by two additions. One of these begins either halfway through 7.25.1, where *ahamkāra* is introduced, or at 7.25.2, where *ātman* is introduced. The purpose of this addition is to subordinate all the principles mentioned in 7.1–15 to the *ātman*. The second addition comprises 7.16 to 7.24.2 or 7.16 to 7.25. The purpose of this addition is to obscure the incompatibility of the statements in 7.15.4 and 7.25.3. *C.U.* 7.1–15 thus constitutes a complete unit in its own right and presents *prāṇa* as the ultimate principle.

The view of *prāṇa* presented above finds its clearest *Upaniṣadic* expression in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, the only early *Upaniṣad* not commented on by Śaṅkara. In *Kauṣ. U.* 4.20 Ajātasātru teaches Dṛpta Bālāki of the Gargya clan, as he did in *B.A.U.* 2.1.17. The teaching is that during sleep speech (*vāc*) together with all names, eye (*cakṣus*) together with all forms, ear (*śrotra*) together with all sounds and mind (*manas*) together with all thoughts enter the *prāṇa*. On waking, the *prāṇas* proceed from the self (*atman* = *prāṇa*), the gods (*deva*) from the *prāṇas* and the worlds (*loka*) from the gods. We are then told that the *prāṇa*, the intelligence-self (*prajñātman*) enters the bodily self (*śarīrātman*) up to the hairs and nails like a razor in a razor case: “on that self these other selves depend as upon a chief his own men”.²⁹

It is clear that there is much in common between this passage and *B.A.U.* 1.4.7. It seems likely that one borrowed from the other or that they both drew on a common source. The *Kauṣītaki* account is more detailed and makes it clear that the *ātman*/Brahman of *B.A.U.* 1.4.7. and 10 is the *prāṇa*/*prajñātman*, this last term being used to indicate the supreme self in *A.U.* 3. Similarly, the context in which these equations occur is also found at *B.A.U.* 2.17 where the term *vijñāna-maya-puruṣa* is employed to refer to the *ātman*. It would appear, then, that the terms *prāṇa*, *ātman*, *prajñātman*, *vijñāna-maya-puruṣa* and Brahman were regarded as being synonymous in meaning by a number of *Upaniṣadic* teachers. This *Kauṣītaki* account, because it

draws the various elements from other places together, thus gives substance to what elsewhere was simply inference.

The other passages where *prāṇa* is presented as an ultimate principle I have dubbed metaphorical. They deal in different ways with a contest between the various faculties for supreme status. By and large, these accounts reiterate what has been said above about the nature of *prāṇa* in pre-*Upaniṣadic* and *Upaniṣadic* literature. They can thus be seen to support my interpretation of that material. In these stories *prāṇa* is presented as a major cosmic principle or as the one ultimate principle from which all else derives. At the material level of creation it diversifies itself to produce both the physical aspects of existence and the more subtle aspects which animate the physical ones. All these accounts describe the subtle manifestations in terms of the sensory faculties plus mind (*manas*), speech (*vāc*) and breath (*prāṇa*), the manifestation most directly derived from and closest in nature to the original cosmic *prāṇa*. Almost every account makes *prāṇa* an immortal principle and the Kauṣītaki accounts make it the intelligence self (*prajñātman*) and the self (*ātman*). Hence, as in the pre-*Upaniṣadic* accounts, *prāṇa* gives rise to mentation – through the *manas* – and, perhaps expressed more clearly here than in the earlier material, it is that reality which can be described as consciousness or intelligence (*prajñā*) or as self (*ātman*).

The Vitalistic Blueprint

It is clear from the foregoing that within the *Vedic* tradition a considerable number of teachers regarded *prāṇa* as the ultimate principle of existence, the immortal source and foundation of everything else, the inner controller of all living beings, unitary in itself but diversified within beings in a variety of ways. Knowledge of this immortal, unitary *prāṇa* constitutes the goal of the religious life. Yet *prāṇa* is not the only term employed to designate this ultimate principle. In the *Upaniṣads* descriptions that are virtually identical to those of *prāṇa* mentioned previously can be found associated with the terms *ātman* and Brahman. The main passages offering such descriptions are *B.A.U.* 1.4.7, 2.1.17, and 4.1.2; *A.U.* 1.2; *Mait. U.* 6.1-3, and 8, and *Kena U.* 1.

B.A.U. 1.4.7

The *Brāhmaṇa* of which this verse is a part opens with the words *ātmaivedam agra āsīt puruṣavidhah*: “In the beginning this (world) was only the self (*ātman*), in the shape of a person.”³⁰ The following verses then describe the process of creation through the bifurcation of the self into man and woman. These transform successfully into all living forms. Verse five then informs us that “he became the creation” (*tataḥ sṛṣṭir abhavat*) and verse seven that at the time ‘this’ was unmanifest (*tadhedam tarhy avyākṛtam āsīt*), it became manifest

through name and form (*nāmarūpa*). He (the *ātman*) entered that which had become manifest,

even to the tips of the nails, as a razor is (hidden) in the razor case, or as fire in the fire source. Him they see not for (as seen) he is incomplete, when breathing he is called breath (*prāṇa*), when speaking voice (*vāc*), when seeing eye (*caḅṣus*), when hearing ear (*śrotra*) when thinking mind (*manas*). These are merely the names of his acts ... The self is to be meditated upon for in it all those become one.³¹

In verse ten, echoing verse one, we are told that in the beginning this (self? world?) was Brahman (*brahma vā idam agra āsit*). This Brahman, like *ātman* in verse one, became the whole creation (*tasmāt tat sarvaṃ abhavat*). These verses thus serve to equate *ātman* and Brahman. The whole section, however, is highly reminiscent of statements about *prāṇa* who, as seen, is incomplete, who manifests as *prāṇa*, *vāc*, *caḅṣus*, *śrotra* and *manas* and who is ultimately the unitary immortal source of all. In other words, the pattern employed in this text to establish *ātman*/Brahman as the fundamental principle is one which is clearly modelled on earlier accounts of the nature of *prāṇa*.

B.A.U. 2.1.17

This verse describes how the *viññāna-maya-puruṣa* (the person made of consciousness) takes the consciousness (*viññānam*) of the *prāṇas*, here referring to the various faculties, into itself and resides in the space within the heart (*antar-hṛdaya-ākāśa*) during sleep. The verse ends with the statement “when the breath (*prāṇa*) is restrained, speech (*vāc*) is restrained, the eye (*caḅṣus*) is restrained, the ear (*śrotra*) is restrained, the mind (*manas*) is restrained.” Verse twenty indicates that this *viññāna-maya-puruṣa* is, in fact, the *ātman*, from which come all *prāṇas*, all worlds (*loka*), all deities (*deva*) and all beings (*bhūta*). The verse ends with the statement “*prāṇas* are the truth (*satya*) and their truth is this (*ātman*)”.³²

Here again we have the connection between the *prāṇas* (faculties/vital breaths) and the self (*ātman*). The relationship between the two is identical to that which in other contexts operates between the unitary *prāṇa* and the diversified *prāṇas*.

B.A.U. 4.1-2

There are seven verses in the first *Brahmaṇa* of this chapter, for which Radhakrishnan provides the sub-heading “Inadequate definitions of Brahman”.³³ It is part of Yājñavalkya’s teaching. Here he asks King Janaka of Videha what other teachers have said about the highest Brahman (*parama brahman*). Upon receiving this request Janaka states that Jitvan Śailini says “speech (*vāc*) is the highest Brahman”, Udaṅka Saulbāyana says “breath (*prāṇa*) is the highest Brahman”, Barka Vārṣṇa

says “the eye (*cakṣus*) is the highest Brahman”, Gardhabhivipita Bhāradvāja says “the ear (*śrotra*) is the highest Brahman”, Satyakāma Jabāla says “the heart (*hṛdaya*) is [the highest] Brahman”. To all these claims Yājñavalkya has just one reply: “This Brahman is only one-footed, Your Majesty”, i.e. it is incomplete or inadequate.

However, Yājñavalkya himself makes no statements about the nature of the highest Brahman. Rather, in 4.2 he asks Janaka where he will go after death. Janaka admits his ignorance and asks Yājñavalkya to enlighten him. Yājñavalkya points out the person in the right eye is Indra (*Indha*) and the person in the left eye is his wife (*Virāj*). These two are united in the space within the heart and move in that channel (*nāḍī*) which goes upward from the heart. Nourishment flows to them through the channels (*hitāḥ*) of the heart. “Therefore that (self composed of *Indha* and *Virāj*) is, as it were, an eater of finer food than the bodily self (*śarīra ātman*).”³⁴ The next verse (v.4) then states that his (the self’s) western side are the western breaths, the eastern side, the eastern breaths, etc. but the self (*ātman*) is not this, not this (*neti, neti*); (see *C.U.* 3.13.1–6 for a correlation between individual breaths and each of the five directions). The *ātman* is then described in exactly the same words that are found in the description of the *ātman* in *B.A.U.* 3.9.26: it is incomprehensible, indestructible, unattached, unfettered, free from suffering and injury.

These two *Brāhmaṇas* constitute what is obviously a version of the competition of the faculties. *Vāc*, *prāṇa*, *cakṣus*, *śrotra*, *manas* and, here, *hṛdaya* are all deemed to be incomplete expressions of Brahman. The complete expression appears to be *ātman*, who is said to be none of the *prāṇas* (here linked with the various directions; in 3.9 stated to be *prāṇa*, *apāna* etc.) and to be incomprehensible etc. Again, there can be little doubt that the manner of introducing and describing the *ātman* is modelled on other accounts where the unitary *prāṇa* occupies the place of the *ātman*. Here, however, instead of the *ātman* which is *prāṇa* occupying the body completely like a razor in a razor case, as in *Kaus U.* 4.20, it abides in the heart.

A.U. 1.2

This is complex text which is difficult to interpret but, given the foregoing analysis of other *Upaniṣadic* passages and the argument set out below, its status as an account of the nature of *ātman* which is ‘modelled’ on similar accounts of the nature of *prāṇa* is not difficult to appreciate. The story line is that of the *ātman* creating the universe. First he creates the worlds (*loka*), which are water (*ambhas*), light space or light rays (*marīcī*), death (*māra*) and water (*apas*). Water (*ambhas*) is above heaven or sky (*dyaus*), which is its support. The light space (*marīcī*) is the atmosphere; death (*māra*) is the earth (*prthivī*) and beneath that are the waters (*apas*). Many translators take the following verses to teach that *puruṣa* was then created out of the waters by the self. The text reads “so ‘*dbhya eva puruṣam samudhṛtyāmūrchayat*”,³⁵ and this

could legitimately be rendered as something like, “from out of these (*udbhya*-ablative plural) he took and gave form to the *puruṣa*”. In other words, the *puruṣa* was derived from all the worlds created by the self and not just from the waters. Then the *ātman* broods over (*abhyataṣa*) the *puruṣa* and ‘hatches’ (*nirabhidyata*) the world guardians (*lokapāla*), which are the various faculties and phenomena, from the parts of the *puruṣa*’s body. The pattern of derivation can be set out as follows:

mouth (<i>mukha</i>)	➔	speech (<i>vāc</i>)	➔	fire (<i>agni</i>)
nostrils (<i>nāsike</i>)		breath (<i>prāṇa</i>)		wind (<i>vāyu</i>)
eyes (<i>akṣiṇi</i>)		sight (<i>cakṣus</i>)		the sun (<i>āditya</i>)
ears (<i>karṇu</i>)		hearing (<i>śrotra</i>)		directions (<i>dīśā</i>)
skin (<i>tvac</i>)		hairs (<i>loma</i>)		plants and trees (<i>ośadhivanaspatya</i>)
heart (<i>hṛd</i>)		mind (<i>manas</i>)		moon (<i>candra</i>)
navel (<i>navhi</i>)		digestive faculty (<i>apāna</i>)		death (<i>mṛtya</i>)
phallus (<i>śiśna</i>)		semen (<i>reta</i>)		waters (<i>āpa</i>)

Once created, these divinities (*devata*): speech, fire, breath, wind, sight, sun, hearing, directions, hairs, plants and trees, mind, moon, digestive faculty, death, semen and waters, all fall into (*prāpātan*) the great ocean (*mahatyamaṇava*) where they experience hunger and thirst. They then ask the *ātman* to find them somewhere to become established (*pratiṣṭhita*) and eat food. They are offered a cow and then a horse but both are deemed to be inadequate. Then the/a *puruṣa* is offered and this is found to be an acceptable home. Each of the principles/deities in the right hand column enters the one from which it was derived and these, in turn, enter into the parts of *puruṣa*’s body from whence they came. Hunger and thirst, however, are then left without an abode, so the *ātman* allows them to enter the *puruṣa* along with the other principles/deities. Finally, the *ātman* produces material form (*mūrti*) from the water(s) (*a/āpa*) and this acts as food.

We are then presented with a version of the contest of the faculties. Food tries to escape being consumed by the *puruṣa*, who tries to seize it with each of his faculties in turn: speech, breath, sight, hearing, skin, mind, generative organ and digestive faculty (*apāna*).³⁶ It is the digestive faculty alone that is able to seize the food. Then comes a peculiar statement: “Vāyu is the grasper of food, Vāyu is the one who lives on food.” Vāyu, of course, is derived from *prāṇa* in the first list so why it is introduced at this point is unclear.

So constituted, the individual *puruṣa* seems to be complete. It is a microcosm of the macrocosm and has the ability, indicated by the list of derivations, to apprehend phenomena and satisfy the needs of hunger and thirst. The *ātman* wonders how (or whether) the *puruṣa*, as it is constituted, can live

without him. He then considers the means by which he could enter this being and dismisses each of the routes listed in columns one and two since he does not identify himself (solely?) with any faculty or part of the body. He thus decides to enter through the door called 'the cleft' (*vidṛti*), located at the crown of the head (*sīman*). Once inside, he perceives 'this very person – 'etam eva puruṣa' (i.e. himself?) as *brahma tataman*' (just that supremé one). The following verse tells us that this perceiver (the *ātman*) is Indra, whose abode is often stated to be in the right eye.

The purpose of the whole chapter seems to be the presentation of a view which not only makes the self the source of all existence but also makes external phenomena derive from the *puruṣa*. The facts that the *ātman* is the ultimate identity of all the worlds, faculties and phenomena, that he enters the body through the top of head and that he is identified with Indra all remind one of *prāṇa*, which in other contexts does all these things and has all these characteristics.

The final chapter of this *Upaniṣad*, just four verses long, supports this connection. It provides information about the nature of the *ātman*. The sanskrit is not clear, however, and verse one could be either a series of questions and answers or just a series of questions.

Hume points out that all the published texts of this *Upaniṣad* open with the words *ko 'yam* though Müller, Bohtlingk and Deussen amend it to *ko yam*. Given the context, I would favour the amendment for the issue would then be cast in familiar mould: that of the faculties competing. Hence, verse one would read:

Who is he whom we worship as the *ātman*? Which one is the *ātman*? [Is it he] by whom one sees, or [he] by whom one hears, or [he] by whom one smells odours, or [he] by whom one speaks speech, or [he] by whom one distinguishes between the sweet and the unsweet?

The implied answer is 'None of these', and this would certainly fit with the conclusions of all other similar competitions. However, instead of straightforward answers, verse two provides a list of mental phenomena, all of which are stated to be names of intelligence (*prajñāna*). Verse three then informs us that this *prajñāna* is everything. It is Brahman, Indra, Prajāpati and all the gods. It is the five elements, the foundation (*pratiṣṭhita*) of all things, the guide or eye (*netra*) of all things. The final verse tells us that 'he',³⁷ by means of the intelligence-self (*prajñātman*), left this world and, having obtained all his desires in the world of heaven, became immortal (*svarge loka sarvān kāmān aptvāmṛtaḥ samabhavat*).³⁸

The *prajñātman* thus seems to be the self referred to in verse one. Such a conclusion would put this text in agreement with the other *Upaniṣad* of the *Rgveda*, the *Kauṣītaki*, in employing the term *prajñātman* to refer to the supreme self. There, of course, the *prajñātman* is explicitly equated with *prāṇa* and such an equation would not be out of character here. If so, we see,

once again, that the concept of *prāṇa* has been employed as a kind of blueprint for the presentation of *ātman* as the supreme principle.

Mait. U. 6.1–3 and 8

He (the self) bears himself in two ways, as he who is breath (*prāṇa*) and he who is the sun (*āditya*). Yonder sun, verily is the outer self; the inner self is breath ... There are, assuredly, two forms of Brahman, the formed and the formless. Now that which is formed is unreal (*asatya*); that which is formless is the real (*satya*); that is the Brahman, that is the light. That which is the light is the sun ... The self (*ātman*) is the lord (*īśāna*), the beneficent (*śambhu*), the real (*bhava*), the terrible (*rudra*), the lord of creation (*prajāpati*), the creator of all (*viśvasṛk*), the golden germ (*hiranyagarbha*), truth (*satya*), life (*prāṇa*), spirit (*haṃsa*), the ordainer (*śāstā*), the pervader (*viṣṇu*), Nārāyaṇa [abode of man], the shining (*arka*), [the] vivifier (*savita*), the upholder (*dhātā*), the maker (*vidhātā*), sovereign (*samrāj*) Indra, the moon (*indur*) ... He who has all forms, the golden one, who is all-knowing, the final goal, the only light, who gives heat, the thousand rayed, abiding in a hundred places, the life (*prāṇa*) of creatures, the yonder sun, rises.³⁹

Once again, the concept of self (*ātman*) as it is presented in this material appears to be employed as a synonym for the unitary *prāṇa*. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* Agni is often put in the same role as the unitary *prāṇa*. Hence, in *Ś.B.* 10.3.3 1–8 we are told that Agni manifests in the body as speech, eye (sight), mind (mentation), ear (hearing) and ‘the agni who is everything here’: *prāṇa*. This is exactly the kind of statement which, elsewhere, describes the manifestation of the unitary *prāṇa* in the body. The first four pass into *prāṇa* during sleep and emerge again on waking. Cosmically, fire corresponds to speech, the sun to the eye, the moon to the mind, the ear to the quarters and Vāyu to *prāṇa*. Similar correspondences are found throughout the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Numerous references make Agni, Vāyu, (or *prāṇa*) and Āditya the three principal manifestations of Agni⁴⁰ and in other places there are statements about Agni which exactly parallel those made about the *ātman* in the above-quoted *Upaniṣadic* text, namely that Agni is the sun (*āditya*) in the cosmos and breath (*prāṇa*) in the individual.

In this *Upaniṣadic* passage the sun (*āditya*) is the formless (*amūrta*) and real or true (*satya*) aspect (*rūpa*) of Brahman. In *B.A.U.* 2.3.1–6 we have a similar account. Here the formless (*amūrta*) and real or true (*sat*) aspects (*rūpa*) of Brahman are *prāṇa*. Taking all this information together it is clear that although it is not explicit in the text the author is drawing on a range of established associations and equivalences where the unitary Agni, the unitary *prāṇa* and the *ātman* can all be equated. This Agni/*prāṇa*/*ātman* is the real, unformed Brahman, the supreme principle which manifests as a variety of cosmic and individualized phenomena. In the final analysis, however, all these manifestations are unreal (*asat* or *asatya*).

Kena Up. 1

Brahman is described as the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the eye of the eye and the *prāṇa* of the *prāṇa* (1.2). Brahman is not expressed through speech but is that by which speech is expressed; is not thought by the mind but is that by which the mind thinks; is not seen by the eye but is that by which the eye sees; is not heard by the ear but is that by which the ear hears; is not breathed by the breath (*prāṇa*) but is that by which the breath breathes. A later verse of the same *Upaniṣad* (3.1) tells us that Brahman once conquered for the *devas* and they gloried in his conquest (a reference to *B.A.U.* 1.3 and *C.U.* 1.2. 1-14 where *prāṇa* defeats the *asuras*?). It would appear, therefore, that here again we have an example of the *prāṇa* concept being employed as a 'model' for the description of Brahman.

Conclusion

Overall, I think the foregoing analyses demonstrate that, in some *Upaniṣadic* circles at least, the concepts of *ātman* and Brahman were developed on the basis of already existing conceptions of *prāṇa*. I am not claiming, however, that *Upaniṣadic* accounts of *ātman* and Brahman are always to be understood in this way. Some *Upaniṣads*, such as the *Īśā* and the *Māṇḍūkya*, do not mention *prāṇa* at all and it could hardly be argued that their presentation of *ātman* and Brahman are derived from descriptions of *prāṇa*. The same applies to the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* which mentions *prāṇa* only once (2.9). Despite these qualifications it is obvious, in the light of the foregoing that the characterization of *prāṇa* as found in the writings of Bādārayaṇa, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and other classical Vedāntins constitutes a far from accurate interpretation of the *Upaniṣads*.

Just why these influential Vedānta teachers were so rigorous in their denial of any equation between *ātman*/Brahman and *prāṇa* is a complex issue in itself but one explanation which links with later developments is that the *prāṇa* concept is not philosophically user-friendly. It has already been noted how the meaning of the term *prāṇa* changes according to the level of description being employed, and this makes it difficult for philosophers to use it in a precise way. It should be mentioned that the same was true of *ātman* in the pre-*Upaniṣadic* literature, where it had a range of meanings from trunk, through body to self, breath and spirit. By the time of the *Upaniṣads* though, it had lost its more physical meanings.

Prāṇa is also a dynamic reality, constantly moving, constantly changing. For the later Vedāntins such an entity could not be truly real. For them, only that which did not change could be real. Linked with this is the fact that the Vedānta tradition came increasingly under the influence of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. Although the author of the *Brahmasūtra* and theologians such as Śaṅkara frequently criticize the Sāṃkhya school for

being unorthodox, a general pattern that can be discerned is that the later the Vedāntin text the more Sāṃkhya concepts are assimilated.

This process can be traced back at least as far as the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and there is plenty of evidence from the great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, that *Vedic* versions of Sāṃkhya existed alongside non-*Vedic* ones. The former were promulgated by brahmins; subscribed to the view that *puruṣa* was single and unitary; incorporated the *Vedic* gods into their systems; and reckoned that a householder could gain release as well as a renouncer. The latter criticized the brahmins for conducting animal sacrifices and thus breaking the code of *ahiṃsā*; subscribed to the view that there were many *puruṣas*; made no reference to gods in their descriptions of the world; and emphasized the importance of renunciation.

The Sāṃkhya cosmology is very orderly. One *tattva* (principle) emerges from another in a pre-determined order; the faculties (*indriya*) are neatly divided into two sets of five: the faculties of perception (*buddhīndriyas*) on the one hand, and the faculties of action (*karmendriyas*) on the other; the *puruṣa* of Sāṃkhya is immutable, not subject to change.

Sāṃkhya thus appeals to an orderly philosophical mind and its highest principle, *puruṣa*, is immutable. In fact, later Vedāntins tend to take *Upaniṣadic* references to *prāṇas* as references to the *indriyas* of Sāṃkhya. However, scrutiny of *Upaniṣadic* passages referring to *prāṇa* reveals that the lists of *prāṇas* in the *Upaniṣads* never include the *karmendriyas* of Sāṃkhya. This shows just how far the later Vedāntins were prepared to go in the direction of misrepresenting *Upaniṣadic* teachings in the service of their own ideas.

A study of references to *prāṇa* in the *Brahmasūtra* and in the writings of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, the two most influential Vedānta teachers, reveals much the same thing. As mentioned earlier, the primary task of the author or authors of the *Brahmasūtra* was to deal with problematic passages from the *Upaniṣads*, that is, passages that were difficult to interpret within the framework of emerging Vedānta philosophy.

Most of these problematic passages dealing with *prāṇa* are, in fact, those presenting *prāṇa* as the ultimate principle or where *prāṇa* seems to be the source of mentation or cognition. In all cases, the aim of Bādarāyaṇa, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja is the same: to claim that the *Upaniṣadic* teachers did not mean what they said when they described *prāṇa* as the source of everything or identified it with *ātman* or *brāhman*. Consequently, the literature of the Vedānta school (except the *Upaniṣads* themselves) has little to say on the concept of *prāṇa*. When it is mentioned it is usually to comment that *prāṇa* is a purely phenomenal principle which has nothing to do with sentience or cognition.

With these considerations in mind, a rather bold and provocative conclusion seems appropriate. It is this. On the subject of *prāṇa* the great Vedānta commentators wilfully misrepresented the teachings of the

Upaniṣads. By doing so they rendered a great disservice to those who turn to them for guidance when seeking to understand the message of those ancient scriptures.

Notes

1. Deutsch, 1969, p. 9.
2. See, for example, their commentaries on *Brahmasūtra* I.1.23(24); I.1.28-31 (29-32); I.3.39 (40-4) and I.4.16-18. Numbers in parentheses refer to Rāmānuja's arrangement
3. Ewing, 1903, p. 9.
4. Whitney, 1905, pp. 632-3.
5. Keith, 1969 [1925], p. 205.
6. *Op. cit.* p. 201.
7. *Op. cit.* p. 206.
8. See *loc. cit.*
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. *Loc. cit.*
11. *Loc. cit.* fn.
12. *Op. cit.* p. 208.
13. *Op. cit.* p. 213.
14. *Op. cit.* p. 220.
15. Ewing, 1903, p. 7.
16. *Loc. cit.*
17. Eggeling, 1882, (1) p. 121.
18. *Idem*, 1895, (4) p. 144.
19. *Idem*, 1900, (5) p. 3 cf. 5.2.4.10 and 11.1.2.3.
20. 7.5.1.22.
21. 1.3.2.3, 8.3.4.5, 10.2.6.15 and 10.3.1.5.
22. 8.2.2.8.
23. 8.1.4.1, 8.7.2.14, 8.7.3.6.
24. 6.3.1.13 and 15.
25. 7.1.1.24.
26. Keith, 1969 [1925], p. 220.
27. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 468-83.
28. *Op. cit.* p. 487.
29. Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 791. This passage makes the existence of the worlds (*loka*) dependent on the gods (*deva*) which, in turn, are dependent on the *prāṇas* (*prāṇa*, *apāna*, etc.) which, in turn, are dependent on *prāṇa/prājñātman*. Such an arrangement reverses the common *Upaniṣadic* pattern of emphasizing cosmology over psychology by making the cosmos (the *adhidaivata* realm) dependent on the individual (the *adhyātma* realm).
30. *Op. cit.* p. 163.
31. *Op. cit.* p. 166 (slightly amended).
32. My translation.
33. Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 246.
34. *Op. cit.* p. 253.
35. *Op. cit.* p. 515.
36. We may note here that whilst speech, breath, etc. all come from column two, skin and generative organ come from column one. Furthermore, the order of digestive faculty and generative organ are reversed in the 'seizing' list. Exactly why skin replaces hairs here is not clear. Radhakrishnan suggests that 'touch' is what is implied. The reason why touch, which would have been the most logical entry in column two, was initially displaced by hairs was probably that the author (or redactor) wanted to get 'ośadhivānaspṛṣṭva' into column three and this would seem to be a peculiar derivation from touch. The reason for the reversal of *śūṣṇā* and *apāna* is more obvious. The writer wanted to end the list with the only successful faculty. The reason for the original order would seem to be the simple physical progression from higher to lower: heart, navel, and phallus.

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37. *Puruṣa* or *ātman*, not, as many commentators suggest, *Vāmadeva*.
38. Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 524.
39. *Op. cit.* pp. 816-7 and 821-2.
40. e.g. 6.3.3.16; 6.7.4.4; 7.1.1.22-23; 8.5.2.8; 9.1.1.23; 9.2.1.21 and 10.6.2.1-11.

Abbreviations

<i>A.Ā.</i>	<i>Aitareya Āraṇyaka</i>
<i>A.U.</i>	<i>Aitareya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>B.A.U.</i>	<i>Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>C.U.</i>	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Kāth. U.</i>	<i>Kātha Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Kauṣ. U.</i>	<i>Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Mait. U.</i>	<i>Maitri Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Muṇḍ. U.</i>	<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>P.U.</i>	<i>Praśna Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Ś.B.</i>	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmana</i>
<i>T.U.</i>	<i>Taittirīya Upaniṣad</i>

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