

THE RISE OF THE ĀTMAN FROM THE SACRIFICIAL FIRE¹

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I

Pinning down the soul is like hunting the Snark. Yet this was what the ancient Indian ritualists endeavoured to do. Even more, far from shrouding their arduous search in mystery, they insisted on mapping out the path that led them to their discovery. They did so in the record they left of their unsparing reflection on sacrifice, preserved and transmitted in the Vedic scriptures, the hallowed *śruti*. For it was in sacrifice that they found man's Self, his soul. In the ancient ritualists' view the peculiar quality that distinguishes the human being is that he is the one animal that is not only fit to be sacrificed but is also able himself to sacrifice². And so we find that the Self (*ātman*) is indeed equated with sacrifice (*yajña*). «Sacrifice is the *ātman* of all beings and of all gods»³. Put differently, man does not sacrifice because he is possessed of a soul but, the other way round, he is possessed of soul because he sacrifices. This tells us, that the soul is not a given, well-defined entity innate in man. It has to be “made” through the “work” (*karman*) of sacrifice, the work *par excellence*. The soul, then, is not an entity, material or immaterial; it is a process – the ever-repeated, never-ending process of sacrifice⁴.

In fact, this is also what the celebrated cosmogonic hymn, *R̥g Veda* 10.90, tells us. In the beginning the Ur-Puruṣa, the Cosmic Man – awesome embodiment of unrestrained primordial vitality – chaotically spread out in all directions, covering the whole world and growing unchecked beyond it. The gods then sacrificed the primordial Puruṣa and created the articulated cosmos out of his sacrificially dismembered body. Here it should be recalled that the word *puruṣa* does not only mean “man” in his outward bodily appearance but also

¹ The present paper is a reworked and shortened version of J.C. HEESTERMAN “Feuer, Seele und Unsterblichkeit” in G. OBERHAMMER ed., *Im Tod gewinnt der Mensch sein selbst. Das Phänomen des Todes in asiatischer und abendländischer Religionstradition*. (Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens 14), (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosoph.-Hist.Kl. Sitzungsberichte 624), Wien, 1995, pp. 27-42.

² *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7. 5. 2. 23; cf. J. SPROCKHOFF, “Die feindlichen Toten und der befriedete Tote”, in G. STEPHENSON (ed.), *Leben und Tod in den Religionen*, Darmstadt 1980, p. 263.

³ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14. 3. 2. 1.

⁴ In this respect it is interesting that in the debate of Yājñavalkya and Ārtaḥāga on man's fate after death it is not the *ātman* (which here is just one of the constituents of the human being and merges, like the others, with the corresponding macrocosmic element at the time of the death) but his *karman* that survives him (*Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 3. 2. 13). Although this passage is differently oriented, one can not help being reminded of Buddhism where equally it is not the *ātman* but one's *karman* that survives.

On the never-ending cyclic process of sacrifice cf. J.C. HEESTERMAN, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, Chicago 1993, p. 38f.

his inner Self or soul⁵. If we further take the equation of Self and sacrifice into account, the hymn is not only a cosmogonic myth. It tells us at the same time – such being the parallelism of macro- and microcosm – that man creates his own Self by offering sacrifice. This, it would seem, explains the enigmatically involute verse that concludes the hymn:

«*With sacrifice the gods sacrificed to sacrifice; these were the first ordinances (dharmāṇi prathamāṇi)*».

The «*first ordinances*», then, mean that the cosmogonic sacrificer is offered to the Self, the *puruṣa*, with that same Self as the victim. Sacrifice, victim and recipient coincide in the single *puruṣa*. In the final analysis man must create his own Self by sacrificing himself.

However, both the Puruṣa-hymn and the statement quoted above that equates sacrifice and Self do not unequivocally distinguish between a universal vital principle or all-soul, and an inalienable, permanent individual soul, seat of the individual's immortality. Instead there is a fluid transition between the collective and the individual, the universal and the particular. The individual self shades off into the collective self «*of all beings and all gods*». Not unlikely a similar cosmic *ātman* may have been present in the background of early Buddhism⁶. Ritualist thought, however, strove to stabilize the *ātman* as the inner Self of the single sacrificer, so as to assert ultimately the *doctrine* of the absolute unity of the individual *ātman* and the universal nexus of all being, the *brahman*, thereby abolishing the fluid transitions. Buddhism went the other way by rejecting in equally doctrinal fashion any such unity and emphasizing instead the transience of the individual Self – the Non-Self (*anatta*) doctrine. Both Buddhism and Vedism would seem to have originally shared the same ground and even when reaching opposite conclusions their original kinship, as we shall have occasion to notice, remained strikingly visible.

Here, however, we should follow out the trails laid out by ritualistic reflection on sacrifice that led to the permanence of the inalienable individual Self as the principle of immortality and ultimate release from the cyclical alternation of life and death.

II

That it was the institution of sacrifice that set off a far-reaching line of thought on man's nature and destiny is hardly a matter of surprise. Sacrifice is directly concerned with the enigmatic nexus of life and death. In the sacrificial arena the participants acted out the riddle of life and death, while competing for the “goods of life” – food, gifts, position, in short: the material substance of life and survival for individual and community alike. In whatever way we may choose to look at sacrifice, there can be little doubt that the Vedic ritualists viewed it as the paradigm of the life-and-death nexus. For them sacrificial ritual was the workshop where they endeavoured to reduce the chain of being to the regular order of a cyclical process, so as to control it. This cyclical process, enacted as the “work” (*karman*) of sacrifice, was, as we noticed, the substance of man's Self, his *ātman*.

Pushing ever further on, ritualistic thought devised a realm of perfect static order that held out to man the promise of transcendence beyond the dynamic alternation of life and death. It was at this point that the unchanging and inalienable *ātman* made its triumphant entry to be identified as the ultimate nexus of all being, the *brahman*.

⁵ Referring to the Puruṣa-hymn, *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 1. 4. 1 explicitly equates *ātman* and *puruṣa*: «*Only the ātman was here in the beginning in the shape of the Puruṣa (puruṣavidha)*».

⁶ As already suggested by H. OLDENBERG, *Die Lehre der Upanishaden und die Anfänge des Buddhismus*, Göttingen 1915, pp. 305-308.

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The question is along what way this point was reached. How did the Vedic ritualists give tangible form to their penetrating thoughts in their sacrificial ritual? Here we come inevitably upon the second term of this paper's title, the sacrificial fire. Vedic sacrifice – like its Old-Iranian relative – was essentially a cult of the fire. This is already apparent in the dominant place of the burnt offering when compared with other ways of offering (in water, exposure, burying and the like). In many respects the original purpose seems to have been the care of the fire. Thus the regular twice-daily offering in the fire, the *agnihotra*, would seem to have been a ritualistically elaborated servicing of the fire that was necessary for its conservation⁷. Generally, by most the greatest number of offerings in the fire are made with *ghee* which is rather a matter of servicing the fire than a burden as is the case with food offerings which may well dampen it. Significantly, the latter type of offering came to be excluded in the Iranian fire cult. The Vedic cult, however, ever more emphasized the burnt oblation as the centre of the proceedings at the expense of the two other important elements, the immolation and the festive meal – the one relegated outside the ritual enclosure, the other postponed till after the conclusion of the ritual⁸.

But why the fire? It may be observed, in the first place, that fire in its various manifestations offers a perfect representation of the mobile, ever-shifting cosmic life force: blazing forth, hiding in the smouldering ashes, dying down, blazing up again or suddenly re-appearing elsewhere. The fire, then, immediately calls to mind in tangible form the everlasting process of becoming, vanishing and re-appearing – the process that sacrifice is meant to control.

Of course, fire is not alone in this among the elements – all of them mobile and interpenetrating –, such as water and air (wind, breath). In fact, fire is often viewed as part of a triad with water and air, as in the well-known cycle fire-smoke-water (rain)-vapour-fire. Also the earth – though seemingly less mobile but nevertheless thought to be adrift on the waters – is tied in, the fire seeking refuge in its humid soil (notably in the loam for the bricks of the fire altar), as it also does in the waters (where, incidentally, the ashes are disposed of). No less suggestive are other phenomena, such as the yearly return of the seasons, the course of the sun or the phases of the moon (which again are associated with the cyclical exchange of fire and water). However, although all this has its place in the spatial and temporal organization of sacrificial ritual, it is the fire that takes pride of place.

The reason for the preeminence of the fire, though remote, would seem to be no less relevant: man's domestication of the fire, the starting point of human culture⁹. Fire is the one cosmic element man can make himself and control. This created an intimate personal relationship between man and his fire. Yet fire remains a self-willed, dangerous element. When not properly handled and maintained, it will revert to its undomesticated state and turn against man – mythologically, Agni turns into Rudra, the feared god of the wilderness and cattle robber. Or it may simply go out, disappear – the mythological motif of Agni's flight from the sacrificial service that threatens to overwhelm (that is, to dampen) him and taking refuge in his «*place of origin*», the waters. This ambivalence makes the relationship all the more critical.

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes the fire's domestication in mythological terms as a contract that, as often in the *brāhmaṇa* texts, should settle an undecided conflict¹⁰. Prajāpati, the creator and lord of life, emanates Agni, the Fire, together with the other

⁷ Cf. H. OLDENBERG, *Die Religion des Veda*, Stuttgart-Berlin 1923, p. 437f.

⁸ Cf. *Broken World of Sacrifice*, pp. 34f, 91, 109f.

⁹ Cf. J. GOUDSBLOM, “The Domestication of Fire as a Civilizing Process”, in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1987, pp. 457-476; *Broken World of Sacrifice*, p. 20f.

¹⁰ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2. 3. 3. 1-8.

creatures. Agni then immediately starts to burn the whole created world. The creatures, however, manage to defend themselves, apparently not without a measure of success. Cornered, Agni proposes a settlement.

«I shall enter into you; you will give birth to me and maintain me; as you will give me birth and maintain me, so I shall give you birth in yonder world and maintain you».

Here we see the two opposite sides of the fire, on the one hand the devastating undomesticated fire, on the other the faithful domesticated fire that enters man – a clear reference to the soul as fire – to be brought forth by him, namely by means of the wooden fire drill (the two *araṇis*). At death the relationship is reversed. The deceased is born in the other world out of the cremation fire.

«When they put him on the funeral pyre, he is reborn out of the fire and the fire that previously was his son is now his father».

A similarly reversible relationship is also expressed in the *mantra* the sacrificer addresses to his sacrificial fire when going on a journey.

«The name, o Fire, that my father and my mother gave me in the beginning you should bear till my return; let me bear your name, o Fire».

On his return the original situation is restored again.

«My name and your name which is exchanged like clothes we should now exchange again, each putting on his own as is fitting, you for long life, we for life»¹¹.

But can one really be sure? For all the confidence that seems to speak from these *mantras*, one can hardly miss the note of imploration. The uncertainty makes itself clearly felt in another *mantra* which refers to the «taking hold of the fire» (*agnigrahaṇa*), that is, when the sacrificer receives the fire drill.

«The fire, o Fathers, that entered our hearts, immortal into mortals, we encompass in the Self; may it not forsake us and go away»¹².

Even though «encompassed in the Self» (*ātman*), the fire may still go away and be lost.

One's fire is one's *alter ego* in life and death. Even more, it is one's life and death. It is, then, rather common-place that Agni, the Fire, especially in the form of the brick-built fire altar of the great sacrifices, is said to be the *ātman*, literally construed through sacrifice. On the other hand, however, it is also the “enemy within”. It lusts after the sacrificer's flesh and must be placated with animal sacrifice at least once a year¹³ – till the final sacrifice, the cremation, when the fire's lust will be definitively satisfied.

The more intimate man's relationship with his fire, the more the tension nears the breaking point. As the “enemy within” it threatens to turn against man. As his “external soul”, exteriorized with the help of the fire drill, the fire may be lost or, more specifically, be carried off by others (as may also happen to the fire drill, which comes down to the same)¹⁴. For all the fiercely personal quality of the relationship, man can, as a matter of principle, not be sure of the undisturbed, permanent possession of his fire.

¹¹ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1. 5. 10 a, b; see also *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* 6. 24. 7, 26. 4 (cf. 11.1.14, 18. 3).

¹² *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 5. 7. 9b; see also *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* 5. 9. 1. Cf. H. KRICK, *Das Ritual der Feuergründung*, Wien 1982, p. 198.

¹³ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11. 7. 1. 2; see also *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* 7. 28. 6-8.

¹⁴ Such a mishap occasions, in ritualistic terms, a repeated founding of the sacrificial fire, see *Baudhāyana Śrauta-sūtra* 3. 3:72. 1.

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Like the Self or soul, its homologue, the fire, is not a stable material entity. It manifests itself as a process – a process, as we already saw, of becoming, vanishing and re-appearing. Even when controlled in sacrifice, its nature is dynamic change and mobility.

III

In the sacrificial cult of the fire the sacrificer takes hold of the cyclical cosmic process that is his Self. However, the Self he creates in sacrifice is not his exclusive and inalienable property. It is, as we noticed, at the same time the universal *ātman* «of all beings and of all gods». It is both intensely personal and undeniably collective. In abstract thought the ambivalent shading over from the personal to the collective need not present an insurmountable problem. It may, on the contrary, offer a fertile ground for the deep and thorough-going speculation – as it did eventually in the Vedāntic doctrine that propounds the ultimate unity of *ātman* and *brahman*. However, when the *ātman* is represented *in concreto* as the fire – it was precisely its nature of a concrete personal property that made for its representing the *ātman* – the situation is quite different. The fire, after all, is not a metaphysical concept but a necessary tool on which depends the life of individual and community alike. Its use is not a matter of speculative thought. It requires practical and jurial arrangements. Put briefly, the question is: whose fire?

Here is the rub. Despite the intensely personal relationship with his fire, the lord of the house can not be the exclusive owner. Others – the members of the household as well as the community at large must be conceded rights to the hearth. We need only to think of the rights and duties of hospitality. The social aspect comes also out in the fact that, usually, the domestic fire is taken from the hearth of the bride-givers at the time of marriage, when the new household is founded¹⁵. It may, according to the texts also be taken from elsewhere, as we shall see, but the point is that one depends on others for one's fire.

There is, of course, also the option, offered by the texts to make the fire oneself by means of the fire drill, without the cooperation, willing or unwilling, of others. But it is significant that such a fire, churned by oneself, though highly meritorious (*puṇyatama*), is in the same breath characterized as unproductive (*anardhuka*)¹⁶. It does not yield prosperity, apparently because it is as meritorious as it is a-social, its meritorious purity being precisely in its independence from society.

We shall, therefore, have to stay for a moment with the ways of society. Apart from the bride-givers one may also obtain one's fire from unrelated householders, even belonging to another *varṇa* than one's own. But now the question – whose fire? – takes a distinctly unpleasant turn. In connection with the cooking fire on the place of sacrifice (*dakṣiṇāgni* or *anvāhāryapacana*) – in fact, it is no other than the domestic fire – we learn that it may be taken from the hearth of a prosperous *brāhmaṇa* or *vaiśya*. That this householder should be prosperous seems plausible enough. There is, however, a small detail that sheds a shrill light on the transaction. The *brāhmaṇa* or *vaiśya* from whom one takes one's fire should not only be prosperous; he should be «prosperous like an asura» (*puṣṭo 'sura iva*)¹⁷ – that is, like the perennial adversaries of the gods. In other words, one takes one's fire from one's enemy. Being «like an asura» he is not likely to give his fire without putting up a fight. Still apart from the fiercely personal relationship with one's fire it is intimately connected with one's cattle, and prosperity. The fire stands for all one is and possesses. And so a

¹⁵ Cf. J.C. HEESTERMAN, "Other Folk's Fire", in J.F. STAAL (ed.), *Agni*, vol. 2, Berkeley 1983, p. 79f.

¹⁶ *Gobhila Gr̥hya-sūtra* 1. 1. 8; *Khādīra Gr̥hya-sūtra* 1. 5. 3.

¹⁷ *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 8. 12:96. 7; see also *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* 5. 14. 1.

parallel text to our passage tells us that «they should take the fire from the house of a prosperous man; in the same way that after the creation of the fire cattle was created the cattle follow the fire when it is taken away, because Agni, the Fire, is Rudra»¹⁸. And so as to leave no doubt the previously quoted passage adds: «what prosperity, what food (there is), that he gains». Winner takes all. That this is not somehow symbolic is made perfectly clear in a comparable passage, where we learn that «one should take flaming fire from the house of one's adversary; he takes away his wealth, his prosperity»¹⁹. Not surprisingly, removing the fire from its hearth is said to be tantamount to manslaughter (*vīrahatya*)²⁰.

The archaic world of sacrifice was no Arcadia. It was a warrior's world, rooted in conflict for the “goods of life”, governed by *peripéteia* and always on the brink of collapse. It did have its conventions though, including commendation, pact and alliance. But most of all it was ruled by the conventions of sacrifice. In the sacrificial arena the periodic *peripéteia*, the cyclic alternation of life and death, was conventionally played out and controlled. There man had to win and lose the *ātman*, the Self, that is the fire. The cosmic process was enacted in the agonistic quest for the peripatetic fire.

IV

How the quest for the fire realized in sacrifice can be seen in the career of the *dīkṣita*, the prospective sacrificer who has undertaken the consecration (*dīkṣa*) in preparation for the sacrificial feast of the Soma beverage. Before he can establish himself as a munificent sacrificial patron he must, as a consecrated warrior, win the goods to be spent in sacrifice. To that end he sets out – not unlike a “knight errant” in quest of the Grail – on an itinerant life²¹. In this he follows the example of the gods, the *devas*, who «drove about on wheels (cakram)», while their adversaries, the *asuras* sat in their hall (*śālam*). And it was in the course of their peregrinations that the gods won the revelatory vision of the fire altar and thereby were able to best the *asuras*²². Similarly, when the *dīkṣita* has successfully stood the test and overcome the dangers, he stands before the decisive turning point. Now he must challenge the *asura*-like magnate and attempt to take over his fire and place of sacrifice in order to turn himself into a sacrificial patron in the place of his opponent.

The turning point is still visible in the classical rules of the ritual manuals. Although the classical *śrauta* system has excluded the opponent from the sacrificial enclosure in favour of the single sacrificer and thereby eliminated the contest and its uncertainty, it has preserved telling traces of the agonistic scenario. So also the decisive moment in the contest for the fire still shines through. I am referring to the churning of fire during the animal sacrifice, when the victim is bound to the stake, the *yūpa*. The importance of this act at this moment is illustrated by the fact that it is here that the manuals deal *in extenso* with the rite of fire churning. However, at this juncture churning the fire seems rather superfluous. The sacrificial fire has already been brought from the *śālā*, the fire hall, to its hearth on the place of sacrifice where it is lustily burning. The newly churned fire is simply added to the already burning fire. This is the strangest for the fact that the mixing of different fires is generally prohibited. The two fires are said to be mutually hostile to the detriment of the sacrificer²³.

¹⁸ *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 1. 6.11:103. 5. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 4. 2. 1:23. 1; see also *Mānava Śrauta-sūtra* 9. 5. 5. 8.

²⁰ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1. 5. 2. 1, 5. Cf. *Broken World of Sacrifice*, p. 137.

²¹ See *Broken World of Sacrifice*, p. 127f.

²² *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6. 8. 1. 1.

²³ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 5. 2. 4. 1; *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 3. 2. 3:29. 11; *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 20.

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What may be the reason for this strangely superfluous and, all told, dubious rite of adding newly churned fire to the already present one? The answer would seem to be in the mutual hostility of the two fires. Briefly, the fire that is already *in situ* belongs to the established lordly sacrificer. The newly churned fire, on the other hand, is the fire of his challenger, the itinerant *dīkṣita*. In the course of his peregrinations the latter did acquire the soma – he has even identified himself with the conquering “King Soma” – as well as the fire. But he has not yet been able to find a firm seat and establish himself as a munificent patron and sacrificer. Now, however, the moment of truth has come. With his freshly churned fire the *dīkṣita* defeats his lordly adversary and takes over his position. Against this background it becomes clear why two different fires are said to be hostile to each other. The exceptional case of mixing the two fires recalls the original agonistic scenario.

The ritual texts, however, only know the single unopposed sacrificer and are silent about a fire contest. The only sign that there may be something untoward in the mixing of the two fires, are two *mantras* imploring the two fires to behave peaceably. «*Be ye two of one mind for us, sharing the dwelling, blameless; do ye two not harm the sacrifice, nor the sacrificial patron, o Fires; be ye two auspicious to us*»²⁴. It is outside the Vedic ritual texts, in the Buddhist story of the conversion of the fire-worshipping Kassapas, that we find a full-fledged fire contest²⁵. On his peregrinations the Buddha arrives at the settlement of the Kassapas. There he requests the Kassapa chief to allow him to pass the night in the fire hut. Thrice the Kassapa tries to warn him off, but in the end cannot refuse the request of the honoured guest. So the Buddha installs himself in the fire hut for the night. As his host had already darkly hinted, the fire manifests itself as a ferocious dragon, threatening the intruder. The Buddha then decides «*to defeat his fire with my fire*». And so it happens. To the awe-struck fascination of the Kassapas there develops an epic fight of the two fire dragons that lasts the whole night. At daybreak the Buddha emerges unscathed from the fire hut and shows his host a harmless little snake cozily rolled up in his alms bowl: «*Here, Kassapa, you see your dragon, his fire has been defeated by my fire*».

In the narrative garb of a miracle story Buddhist tradition seems to have preserved what is withheld by the Vedic ritualists. The story purports to an ultimate fire contest to end all such contests. Perhaps one might even say – but the text does not say so explicitly – that the Buddha's victory did not only deprive the fire of its meaning but also the Self²⁶.

V

Interestingly, a similar break-through was achieved by the Vedic ritualists. The result however, was the reverse. Buddhism decides the ambivalence of the cosmic process and its recurrent *peripeteia* in favour of permanent instability and ultimately of the doctrinal rejection of the Self. Vedic ritualism on the contrary ended up with asserting the stability of the *ātman* as the principle of permanence and immortality. How this break-through in Vedic-brahmanic thought was achieved, we may learn from two *brāhmaṇa* passages – not

1:19. 18.

²⁴ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1. 3. 7. n, o. Cf. *ibid.* 6. 3. 5. 4; *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 26. 7:131. 9-10; *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 3. 9. 5:121. 17. 6 (where the “offering” of fire in the already present fire is characterized as a “cruel”, *krūra*, act). See also *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* 7. 13. 6.

²⁵ *Mahāvagga* 1. 15. 2-7; cf. *Mahāvastu* III, pp. 428-430.

²⁶ It may be of interest in this connection that there is a structural agreement between the Buddha's fire sermon and his sermon on the Non-Self, as already observed by Oldenberg (*Lehre der Upanishaden*, p. 306)

unrelated to each other, as it seems –, an older and a later one, from the *Kāṭhaka* and the *Śatapatha* respectively.

The first and older passage is rather inconspicuous. It deals with one of the many smaller sacrifices for the fulfilment of particular wishes (*kāmyā iṣṭi*).²⁷ In this case the aim is to end a fatal epidemic. As is practically standard in the *brāhmaṇas*, the never-ending conflict of the *devas* and the *asuras* is invoked. At first the *asura* as usual, have the edge on the *devas*. As we are told, the *asuras* when slain sprang to life again and went on fighting; not so the gods, however. The interesting point is that the gods become aware that, in fact, it was Agni, the Fire, who killed them. The *asuras*, then, are in possession of the fire which the gods are lacking. So the gods, in the usual way, cleverly manage to have Agni come over to their side by offering him a share in sacrifice, namely the said wishfulfilling *iṣṭi*. Here we observe again the ambivalence and mobile nature of the fire. At first it spells death to the gods, while giving the *asuras* immortality, till the gods manage to reverse the situation by depriving the *asuras* of the fire and so defeat them. But nothing guarantees that the *devas* will not lose the fire again in the same way they won it.

All this would hardly be remarkable if it were not for the other, younger, passage, where the matter takes a different turn²⁸. The initial situation is the same, *devas* and *asuras* are fighting each other and, here too, the issue is the possession of the fire. In contradistinction, however, to the *Kāṭhaka*, the *Śatapatha* does not have Agni commit himself to either of the parties, nor does Agni change sides. Our passage insists – it looks like a polemic against the view represented by the *Kāṭhaka* – that in the beginning both *devas* and *asuras* were mortal. Neither gods nor *asuras* when slain came to life again. Among them only Agni is immortal. And as such he indiscriminately dispenses life as well as death to both parties. But how is it that *devas* as well as *asuras* are mortal? The answer of the *Śatapatha* is unequivocal.

«They were both anātmanah, without a Self, for he who is mortal has no ātman».

Conversely, we may conclude that Agni, the Fire, is equivalent to the *ātman*. Here, however, Agni does not move about from one party to the other, as he does in the *Kāṭhaka* passage. He is stable and permanent but by the same token he stands aloof from mortal life.

The striking feature of the *Śatapatha*'s version is the apparent proximity to the Buddhist view of *anattā* which apostrophizes unstable mortal life as Non-Self. After meeting at this point, however, Buddhism and Brahmanism go diagonally opposite ways.

Having stated that mortality is the lack of the Self, the *Śatapatha* relates how the gods did after all acquire possession of the fire and thereby Self and immortality. As in the *Kāṭhaka*, the gods are initially worsted by the *asuras*. Nevertheless they keep on – as the text puts it – «singing and exerting themselves» (*arcantaḥ śrāmyantaś ceruḥ*) till they obtain the decisive revelation. That is, they have the ritualistic vision of the «immortal agnyādheya», the ritual for establishing the sacrificial fire. What is immortal is not the unstable, peregrinating fire – in the *Śatapatha* it does not move about anymore – but its unswerving and inalienable form “made” by the sacrificer as the *rite* founded fire, in the same way that the Self is “made” through the ritual *karman* of sacrifice. We are here reminded also of the overwhelming Puruṣa who had to be fashioned and articulated through sacrifice according to the «first ordinances». Only in this way can the fire be made into the inalienable and immortal Self. Or, as the *Śatapatha* tells us, when the gods had won its

²⁷ *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 10. 7:132. 2-10; see also W. CALAND, *Altindische Zauberei*, Amsterdam 1908, p. 57f.

²⁸ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2. 2. 8-10 (Kāṇva Recension 1. 2. 2. 6).

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revelatory vision, they founded the immortal fire in their inner Self (*antar ātman*). And so, having become immortal, they overcame the *asuras*.

At this point, however, victory and defeat in the sacrificial contest have lost their meaning. It is significant that the *Śatapatha* continues by telling us that now the *asuras* too have the fire.

«*They (the gods) said: "this fire is with both of us, so let us treat with the asuras"».*

The uncertain contest and its reversals of fortune has been overcome. Its place was taken by the unshakable certainty of the permanent, inalienable *ātman*.

VI.

In the time-honoured language of sacrificial contest and mystic vision fire and immortality were definitively stabilized in the inviolable individual Self. The soul has been finally pinned down. Thus the *Śatapatha* can confidently assert that henceforth the sacrificer can not lose his fire anymore. Nothing, nobody, can come between him and his fire. Even if a hostile horde would overrun his place of sacrifice, the unity of man and his fire would not be shaken. For the sacrificial fire is safely ensconced in man's inner Self.

It is the incontrovertible achievement of the ancient Indian ritualists to have won out of the sacrificial contest the potential for transcendence vested in the inalienable individual Self.

Here the sacrificial cult of the fire has run its full course. From now on the fire recedes behind the *ātman*. The ultimate contest for life and death is the sacrifice in man's inner Self. As the single sacrificer had to take up the part of his challenger in the contest for the fire, so he is his own opponent in the inner sacrifice. The *Śatapatha* says it more pregnantly: «*Death is his own Self*». He who knows thus conquers recurrent death and finds immortality. The cycle of life and death implodes in the inner Self²⁹.

In the *karman* of self sacrifice – as in the sacrifice of world renunciation – man wins his inviolable Self beyond life and death. Even more, the Self *is* the inner sacrifice.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 10. 5. 2. 28, 6. 5. 8.