HEART IN THE UPANIŚADS

PATRICK OLIVELLE

Among the parts of the human anatomy, the heart occupies a central place in Upaniṣadic discourse. It deals with the space within the heart, the veins that run from the heart; with the exact function of the heart and veins, especially during sleep, dream, and wakefulness. At still another level there is the speculation concerning the "cave of the heart" as the bodily location of the immortal "self". The epistemological function of the heart, especially with regard to memory, is another area of cardiac speculation. This paper addresses several of these issues, focusing on the perceived epistemological function of the heart in relation to memory and meditative contemplation.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural creation of the body has occupied a central role in scholarship for many decades and within a wide variety of disciplines. For some it has been the scholarly fad of the moment. Studies by numerous scholars, however, have used the discourse on the body profitably to produce significant new insights into ancient and contemporary societies. Peter Brown's (1988) fine analysis of ancient Christianity, Caroline Walker Bynum's (1987) work on medieval Christian women, and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's (1990) study of ancient Judaism, are good examples.¹ The British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1982, 65) has expressed succinctly the theoretical presupposition in the study of the social significance of body manipulations:

¹. See also the three-volume study of the body containing contributions from numerous international scholars, Feher (1989); the edited volume of Chakley (1997); and, from an anthropological point of view, Turner (1984).

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The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society... The forms it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways. The care that is given to it, in grooming, feeding and therapy, the theories about what it needs in the way of sleep and exercise, about the stages it should go through, the pains it can stand, its span of life, all the cultural categories in which it is perceived, must correlate closely with the categories in which society is seen in so far as these also draw upon the same culturally processed idea of the body.

In other words, a culture's discourse on and manipulation of the physical body speaks loudly about its understanding and construction of the social body.

In this paper I will restrict myself to a close reading of the Upaniṣadic discourses on the heart, with passing observation on the earlier Vedic literature and the subsequent Brahmancial texts.²

First, let us consider some basic assumption within which the Upaniṣadic thinkers probably operated. 1) Indians, just as all other humans before William Harvey's (1578-1657) discovery of blood circulation in 1628, were unaware of the physiological function of the heart and about its role in the circulation of blood. Like their western counterparts, Indians believed that air circulated through the arteries. 2) The heart is the only internal organ whose actions can be perceived; the beating of the heart is a sure sign of life. 3) Heart has an interesting shape: with some imagination one can think of it as round, the perfect shape, the shape of the sun, an egg, or a lotus bud—all important symbols in Indian cosmology. 4) The heart is empty inside: it has an outer covering and an inner space, just like the cosmos as conceived in ancient Indian cosmology. The physiological role of the space within the heart was not understood—unlike other empty organs such as the stomach and the bladder, whose function was evident from their contents. 5) The heart is connected to numerous tubes that travel to various parts of the body, tubes whose physiological function was not well understood. 6) Something external to the heart itself but which contributed to the speculation regarding the heart is the brain. Indians, and possibly most ancient

². For the role of the heart in later Indian literature, particularly in the medical treatises, see Das (2003, especially 590-593). For a detailed account of the body parts in the Upaniṣads, see G. W. Brown (1929).
peoples, did not know the physiological function of the brain with regard to thought, emotion, sensation, and motor skills. The Sanskrit word for brain, *mastiśka*, is rare, and it plays no part in speculations regarding the human body. As in the West, where many functions of the brain are ascribed to the heart—consider heart-shaped chocolates on Valentine’s day or expressions such as “learn by heart”—so in India cognitive and emotive functions were thought to be physically located in the heart.

The heart does not play a significant role in early Vedic discourse represented by the Vedic **Samhitās**, although evidence suggests that several of the views finding expression in the later literature, such as the connection between heart and mind, are found already in the **Rgveda**. A question that presents itself is why after a long period of relative obscurity, the heart emerged as a central focus of the cosmological speculations of the late Vedic period represented by the **Upaniṣads** and some of the **Brāhmaṇas** belonging roughly to the same period, such as the **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa**. This is a significant question that is beyond the scope of this paper; I will return to it briefly in the conclusion.

To give some structure to these reflections, I will divide this paper into six sections dealing with the role of the heart in selfhood, knowledge, emotion, cosmos, sleep/dream/death, and soteriology.

**HEART AND SELF**

In the Vedic animal sacrifice the first part of the animal that the priest bastes with clotted ghee is the heart, because, says the **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa** (3.8.3.8), “the heart truly is the self, the mind, and the clotted ghee is the breath; he thus puts the breath into its self, into its mind” (*ātmā vai mano hrdayam; prāṇah prṣadāyam; ātmān evaitan manasi prāṇam dadhāti*). Here we find *ātman, manas*, and *prāna*—the bearers of selfhood, thought, and life in the late Vedic speculation—located in the heart. The heart is the first portion of the animal offered in the ritual fire, and the **Śatapatha** explains why: “the reason why he first makes a portion of the heart which

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3. See Sellmer 2000 for a brief survey of the heart in the **Rgveda** and for further bibliography. Gonda (1963, 276-288) deals with the conception of the heart in the early Vedic texts. Even though the heart is invoked frequently in hymns, there is no sustained treatment of the heart’s function in the early texts.

4. Translations from the **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa** are from Julius Eggeling’s translation in *Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford: 1882-1900.
is in the middle, is that the heart is the breath, since it is from there that the breath moves upward” (sa ṛtdayasyavāgre ‘vadyati; tad yān madhyataḥ sato ṛtdayasyāgre ‘vadyati prāṇo vai ṛtdayam aṭo ṛt ay am ṝd̄vah prāṇah sāncaraṭi: 3.8.3.15). Further: “the animal is truly the hear; thus he first makes a portion of its very self (ḥṛdayam u vai paśuḥ; tad asyaśātmaka evāgre ‘vadyati: 3.8.3.16). The heart thus stands for the animal as a whole in a physiological synecdoche. But this connection of the self with the heart is not merely symbolic; the carrier of selfhood was thought to be located within the heart.

This ritual reasoning is carried over into the Upaniṣads, which locate the ātman within the heart. The Bhadāranyaka (5.6.1) says that the Puruṣa made of mind and light, as small as a grain of rice or barley, and the Lord of all, is lodged within the heart: “This person here is made of mind and consists of light. Lodged here deep within the heart, he is like a grain of rice or barley; he is the lord of all, the ruler of all! Over this whole world, over all there is, he rules” (manomayo ‘yaṁ puruṣo bhāṣyas tat sanant arantar ṛtdayae yathā vrihīr vā yaśo vā. sa esa sarvasyesānaḥ sarvasyādhipatiḥ sarvam idāṁ praśāsti yad idāṁ kīnco). The Chāndogya (3.14.2.4), likewise, locates the ātman that contains everything deep within the heart, in the repeated refrain: “This ātman of mine that lies deep within my heart” (esa ma ātmāṁantar ṛtdayae). Indeed, the Chāndogya (8.3.3) finds an etymological connection between ātman and ṛtdayam — the heart is called ṛtdayam from the statement ṛtdayaṁ aṣṭam, “this (i.e., the ātman) is in the heart”.

HEART AND KNOWLEDGE

The ritual discourse of the Brāhmaṇas thus locates both ātman and manas within the heart, drawing a close connection between self and knowledge, on the one hand, and between both these and the heart, on the other. In the Agnicayana ritual, the Stomabhāga bricks are identified with the heart, and the Aśādaḥ bricks, upon which they are placed, are identified with the earth. Thus, the Satapatha (8.5.4.3) says, “he lays into this (earth) the heart, the mind” (asyāṁ tad dhrdayaṁ mano dadhāti) and goes on to state that a person “thinks with the heart, with the mind” (ḥṛdayena manasaḥ cetayate) underscoring the identity of the heart and the mind by their apposition. Heart then is not only the locus of the self but also the organ where the power of thinking and self-consciousness resides.

The well-known creation account of the Aitareya Upaniṣad (1.1.4) says that from the initial cosmic incubation a heart was hatched, and from the heart sprang mind. And when the creator told the faculties to enter
their respective dwellings, the moon became mind and entered the heart (Aitareya 1.2.4). The Brhadaranyaka (3.9.23) says that truth is founded on the heart, “because one recognizes truth with the heart” (hrdayena hi satyam jānāti). And in the famous dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyi (Brhadaranyaka 2.4.11), where he discusses the points of convergence of various realities, such as waters in the ocean and tastes in the tongue, he identifies the heart as the point of convergence of all forms of knowledge (sarvasaṁ vidyānāṁ hrdayān ekāyanam).

With knowledge comes doubt, often compared to a knot in the heart, and it is also located within the heart. The Mundaka (2.2.8) says that when he sees the self, “the knot of one’s heart is cut and all doubts are dispelled” (bhidyate hrdayagranthiḥ chidyante sarvasaṁśayāḥ). When doubt disappears, there is peace in the heart. Thus, the Chāndogya (8.8.3 etc.) describes the foolish Indra and Vairocana, who departs from Prajāpati after receiving partial instructions regarding the nature of ātman, as leaving sāntahṛdayah, “with peaceful or contented hearts”.

HEART AND EMOTION

The heart is also associated with emotion, love, and sexuality, a theme more familiar to modern audiences. In his interrogation of Yājñavalkya, the theologian Śākalya asks about the god of “the person whose abode is passion, whose world is the heart, and whose light is the mind” (kāma eva yasyāyatanaṁ hrdayān loko mano jyotiḥ). Yājñavalkya replies: "Women" (striyaḥ: Brhadaranyaka 3.9.11). And to the question about the “the person whose abode is semen, whose world is the heart, and whose light is the mind” (reta eva yasyāyatanaṁ, hrdayān loko mano jyotiḥ), Yājñavalkya replies: “Prajāpati” (Brhadaranyaka 3.9.17). Here we have passion (kāma), women, semen, and Prajāpati, all connected with sexuality and fertility, located in the heart. Indeed, the Brhadaranyaka (3.9.19-25) affirms that everything—sacrifice, faith, waters, semen, truth, speech—is founded on the heart. And because semen is located in the heart, the Brhadaranyaka (3.9.22) observes, “when someone has a son who is a picture of the father, people say: ‘He has dropped right out of his heart! He is carved from his very heart!’” (tasmād api pratitāpanāṁ jātān āhur hrdayād iva srpto hrdayād iva nirmīta iti).

5. Note here the connection established between love-passion, heart, and mind.
6. On the connection between sexuality, sexual fluids (both male and female), and the heart in the later medical literature, see Das (2003).
The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (10.5.2.9) and the Brhadāraṇyaka (4.2.2-3) regard the space within the heart literally as the space into which the male and female persons in the right and left eyes, Indra and Virāj, enter during sleep and within which they make love. The path along which they travel from the eyes to the heart and back to the eyes is the vein that goes upward from the heart.

Clearly, the true name of the person in the right eye is Indha. Even though he is really Indha, people cryptically call him "Indra", because gods in some ways love the cryptic and despise the plain. What looks like a person in the left eye, on the other hand, is his wife Virāj. Their meeting place is the space within the heart, their food is the red lump in the heart, and their garment is the meshlike substance within the heart. The path along which they travel is the vein that goes up from the heart. The veins called Hitā that are located in the heart are as fine as a hair split a thousandfold.

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\text{indho ha vai nāmaśya yo 'yaśi daksine 'ksani puruṣah. taṁ vā etam indham santam indra ity ācakṣate parokṣayāta. parokṣapriyā āva hi āvāh pray-}
\text{aksadvīṣah. athaitad vāme 'ksani puruṣarūparēṃ esāya patni virāt. tayor eṣa samistāva ya eṣo 'ntarhṛdaya ākāśaḥ. aṭhainayor etad aṇnaṁ ya eṣa}
\text{'ntarhṛdaye lohitapiṇḍaḥ. aṭhainayor etad pṛavaṇaṁ yad etad anitarhṛ}
\text{daye jālakam īva. aṭhainayor eṣa śīśa śaṅcaranī yaiśa āryeśu ārdhvā}
\text{nādy uccarati. yathā keśaḥ sahasradhā bhinna evam aṣayā hitā nāma}
\text{nādhya 'ntarhṛdaye praṭiṣṭhitā bhavanti.}
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At a different level of discourse, where desire is viewed as an obstacle to reaching liberation and immortality, the man who has overcome desire, the man who does not desire, is celebrated in this verse (Brhadāraṇyaka 4.4.7; Katha 6.14), where also desire and passion are located in the heart:

When they are all banished,
those desires lurking in one’s heart;
Then a mortal becomes immortal,
and attains brahmān in this world.

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yadā sarve pramucyante kānā ye śya hṛdi śrītāh |
athā mṛtyo ‘mṛto bhavatī atra brahma samaśnute ||
\]

Other emotions besides lust and sex, emotions such as sorrow and fear, are also located in the heart. The liberated individual is said to have “passed be-
yond all sorrows of the heart” (tīrṇo hi tadā sarvāṇi chokāṁ hrdayasya bha-
vati; Brhadāraṇyaka 4.3.22). The anguish of the animal slaughtered in sacri-
fice, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (3.8.5.8) and the Taittirīya Sanhitā (5.4.1.3-4) tell us, “concentrates itself into the heart” (pāṣor ha vā ālabhyamānasya
hrdayair śuk samabhayavaiti). The heart is also the seat of fear (Atharva
Veda 8.8.2).

HEART AND COSMOS

It is well-known that the Vedic ritual speculation in general and Upaniṣadic
thought in particular draw close parallels and connections (bandhu) be-
tween the physiological and the cosmic, between the adhyātman and the
adhidaivaṁ. The heart as the central bodily organ plays a crucial role in
these metaphysical equivalencies. The Chāndogya (3.12.7-9) is explicit:

Take what people call brahman — clearly, it is nothing but this space here
outside a person. And this space here outside a person — clearly, it is the
same as this space here within a person. And this space here within a
person — clearly, it is the same as this space here within the heart.

yad vai tad brahmeti vāva tad yo 'yaṁ bahirdhā puruṣād ākāśaḥ. yo vai sa
bahirbhā puruṣād ākāśaḥ, ayaṁ vāva sa yo 'yaṁ antaḥ puruṣa ākāśaḥ. yo
vai se 'ntaḥ puruṣa ākāśaḥ, ayaṁ vāva sa yo 'yaṁ antar hrdaya ākāśaḥ.

The body, the Chāndogya (8.1.1) says, is the “fort of brahman” (brahmapu-
ra), and “in this fort of brahman there is a small lotus, a dwelling place,
and within it, a small space. In that space there is something you should
try to discover” (atha yaṁ idam asmin brahmapure dāharaṁ punḍarikaṁ
veṣma daharo 'smīṁ antar ākāśaḥ. taṁ smin yaṁ antas tad anveṣayaṁ tad
vāva vijñāśiṣṭavyam iti). And what is it that one should discover within
the space of the heart? The Chāndogya (8.1.3) answers that the whole cosmos is
contained within the space in the heart:

As vast as this space here all around us,
is that space within the heart;
And in it are contained both earth and sky,
Both fire and wind, both the sun and the moon
both lightning and the stars;
Both what belongs to it and what does not,
in it is contained all that.
yāvān vā āyam ākāśas tāvān eṣo 'ntar hṛdaya ākāśah |
ubhe asmin dyāvāpṛthivi antar eva samāhite ||
ubhāv āgniḥ ca vāyuḥ ca śiryācandramasāv ubhau vidyun naksatrāṇi |
yac cāsehāṣṭi yac ca nāsti sarvāḥ tad asmin samāhitam ||

We saw the etymology of the heart (hṛdaya āyam) that, at the level of adhyātmā, connects the heart with ātmā. The Brhadāraṇyaka (5.3.1) gives a parallel cosmological etymology:

_Hṛdayam_, the heart — it is Prajāpati; it is brahmā; it is the Whole. This word _hṛ. da. yam_ is made up of three syllables. _Hṛ_ is one syllable. To a man who knows this his own people, as well as others, bring (ḥṛ-) gifts. _Da_ is another syllable. To a man who knows this his own people, as well as others, give (dhā-) gifts. _Yam_ is the third syllable. A man who knows this goes (i-) to heaven.

esa prajāpatir yad dhrdayam. etat brahma. etat sarvam. tad etat tryakṣa-rain hṛdayam iti. hṛ ity ekam akṣaram. abhihārante asmai svās cāny[e] ca ya evaṁ veda. da ity ekam akṣaram. dadaṛty asmai svās cāny[e] ca ya evaṁ veda. yam ity ekam akṣaram. e[ti] svargaṁ lokani ya evaṁ veda.

In this etymology, connections are made between the heart and two areas of central importance to Vedic theologians: worldly power over one’s own as well as other people, and heaven after death.

The cosmic connections of the heart is especially prominent in the speculation regarding the veins proceeding from the heart. The Chāndogya (3.13.1-8) speaks of the five openings of the heart corresponding to the four directions and the zenith. These openings are connected in turn with the five breaths (prāṇa), with the five faculties (sight, hearing, speech, mind, and breath), and with five cosmic entities (sun, moon, fire, rain, space). The Chāndogya (8.6.1) also draws a parallel between the veins of the heart and the rays of the sun. The veins are filled with a fine fluid of orange, white, blue, yellow, and red; the rays of the sun are similarly colored. The rays of the sun continue into the veins of the heart, and vice versa, just like a long highway joining two villages (Chāndogya 8.6.2).

Just as a long highway traverses both the villages, the one near by and the one far away, so also these rays of the sun traverse both the worlds, the one down here and the one up above. Extending out from the sun up there (the rays of the sun) slip into these veins here, and extending out: from these veins here, they slip into the sun up there.
And it is this connection that explains both sleep and death, themes I will turn to below.

The Maitreyi Upanishad (6.17) places fire within the heart and declares: “The fire there in the heart, the fire here within the heart, and the fire up there in the sun—they are one” (yaś caiso īsmau yaś cāyaṁ hṛdaye yaś cāsāv āditye sa ēsa ekā iti).

The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (9.1.2.40) seeks the identity of the heart and the sun in their identical shapes: “The heart assuredly is the sun up there, for it is smooth and the heart is smooth; it is round, and the heart is round” (asau va āditya hṛdayam śaṅkṣṇa ēsa śaṅkṣṇau hṛdayam parimaṇḍala ēsa parimaṇḍalan hṛdayam). The ritual offerings are directed at actuating this deep identity: “he thus makes the sun his heart, and that heart of his he thus makes boneless and immortal” (ādityam evāsyaitad dhṛdayam karoty ato hṛdayam evāsyaitad anasthitam amṛtam karoti).

**SLEEP, DREAM, AND DEATH**

In the Chāndogya (8.6.1) passage we have just examined, the connection between the veins of the heart and the rays of the sun is taken a step further; that connection also explains the processes of sleep and death, as well as the technique of reaching immortality (Chāndogya 8.6.3):

> When someone is sound asleep here, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams, he has then slipped into these veins. No evil thing can touch him, for he is then linked with radiance.

> tad yatraitat suptaḥ samastah sanāprasamāñ svapnāṁ na viśāyati. āsū tadā nādiṣu srptah bhavati. tam na kaś ca na pāpāṁ sprśati.

In deep sleep the person lies within the veins of the heart and, therefore, also within the rays of the sun.

The process of deep sleep is analogous to that of death, except that in death the person not only gets into the veins but also travels along them outside the body. Then, traveling along the rays of the sun, he reaches the sun. If someone is able to accomplish this difficult task, he reaches the immortal (Chāndogya 8.6.4-5):
Now, when someone here has become extremely infirm, people sit around him and ask: “Do you recognize me?” “Do you recognize me?” As long as he has not departed from the body, he would recognize them. But when he is departing from this body, he rises up along those same rays. He goes up with the sound “oṁ”. No sooner does he think of it than he reaches the sun.

atha yattraṇad abalimānāṁ nito bhavati. tam abhita āśinā āhur jānāsī māṁ jānāsī māṁ iti. sa yāvad asmāc charirād anuṭkrānto bhavati, tāvaj jānāti. atha yattraṇad asmāc charirād utkramati. athaitair eva rasvibhir ārdhavan ākramate. sa om iti và hōd và miyate. sa yāvai kṣīpyen manas tāvad ādityam gacchati.

Only one vein in the heart, however, transports a person to the sun. The *Chāndogya* (8.6.6) cites an ancient verse:

One hundred and one, the veins of the heart.
One of them runs up to the crown of the head.
Going up by it, he reaches the immortal.
The rest, in their ascent, spread out in all directions.

śatam caikā ca hrdayasya nādyas tāsām mūrdhānam abhinibartaikā
tayordhvaṁ āyām amṛtatvaṁ eti viṣvaṁ ānitya utkrāmaṇe bhavanti ||

The sun is also the door to immortality; and it is this very knowledge of the identity of the heart with the sun that permits the person to pass through that door into the world of immortality (*Chāndogya* 8.6.5):

It [the sun] is the door to the farther world, open to those who have the knowledge but closed to those who do not.

etad vai khalu lokaivāraṁ viḍuṣām prapadaṅaṁ nirodho 'viḍuṣāṁ.

A similar description of death, when the self descends into the heart taking the cognitive powers with it and then exits the body from the heart through a vein, is given also in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (4.4.1-2):

Now, as this self (*ātman*) grows steadily weaker and begins to lose consciousness, these vital functions (*prāṇa*) throng around him. Taking into himself these particles of light, he descends back into the heart. When
the person connected with sight turns back, the man loses his ability to perceive visible forms. So people say: 'He's sinking; he can't see!' — 'He's sinking; he can't smell!' — 'He's sinking; he can't taste!' — 'He's sinking; he can't speak!' — 'He's sinking; he can't hear!' — 'He's sinking; he can't think!' — 'He's sinking; he can't feel a touch!' — 'He's sinking; he can't perceive!' Then the top of his heart lights up, and with that light the self exits through the eye or the head or some other part of the body. As he is departing, his lifebreath (prāṇa) departs with him. And as his lifebreath departs, all his vital functions (prāṇa) depart with it.

sa yatraśa ētuṁbalyaṁ nyetya saṁmoham iva nyeti. athainam ēte prāṇā abhisamāyanti. sa etās tejoṁtraṁ samabhjayadāna hṛdayam evāvavakrāmati. sa yatraśa cākṣusah puruṣaḥ parāṁ paryāvartate, athārūpaṁ bhavati. ekibhavati na paśyati āhuh. ekibhavati na jighrati āhuh. ekibhavati na rasaṁyata ity āhuh. ekibhavati na vadātity āhuh. ekibhavati na śṛṇātity āhuh. ekibhavati na maṁo āhaṁ āhuh. ekibhavati na śṛṇātity āhuh. ekibhavati na viśūttity āhuh. tiṣyā haitasya hṛdayasyāvaktān pravayotate. tena pradhyorasāṁ ētuṁ niśkrāmati caṅgūṣto vā mūrdhno vāṁye-bhuvā νārādeśebhuvāṁ. tam utkramantam prāṇo 'nāukramati. prāṇam anuśtuṁkramantah sarve prāṇā anuśtuṁkramantah.

If deep sleep is when the self is in the veins, sleep is when the self is within the space of the heart. Within the heart the self enters a parallel and alternate mode of existence, a universe parallel to the world of outer space where activities and consciousness of waking take place. The Brhadāraṇyaka (2.1.17-19) gives a detailed description of dream and of dreamless sleep:

When this man was asleep here, the person consisting of perception, having gathered the cognitive power of these vital functions (prāṇa) into his own cognitive power, was resting in the space within the heart. When that person takes hold of them, then the man is said to be asleep. During that time the breath remains in the grasp of that person, as do speech, sight, hearing, and mind. Wherever he may travel in his dream, those regions become his worlds. He may appear to become a great king or an eminent Brahmin, or to visit the highest and the lowest regions. Just as a great king, taking his people with him, may move around in his domain at will, so he, taking the vital functions here with him, moves around his body at will.

yatraiṣa etat supto ‘bhūd ya eṣa viṣīnāmamayāḥ puruṣas tad eṣāṁ prāṇāṁ prāṇaṁ viṣīnāṁ viṣīnāṁ ādāya ya eṣa ‘etar hṛdaya ākāśas tasmiṁ cīte. tāṁ
The passage continues with the description of dreamless sleep in which the self moves out of the space within the heart and travels along the veins that proceed into the outer parts of the heart:

When a man is in deep dreamless sleep, on the other hand, and is not aware of anything at all, this is what happens. There are seventy-two thousand veins named Hitā that run from the heart to the pericardium. He slips out of the heart through these veins and rests within the pericardium. He rests there oblivious to everything, just as a young man, a great king, or an eminent Brahmin remains oblivious to everything at the height of sexual bliss.⁷

The conceptions of the heart as the seat of the self, as the organ of thought and emotion, as the location of sleep and dream, and as the location from which the self departs at death, open the way for the heart to be considered also as the locus of the yogic quest, as the tranquil cave in which the self can meditate on the absolute. Even though the heart is not mentioned explicitly in these passages, the identification of cave and heart must have been common at the time for the term cave alone to stand for the space within the heart. In the Taittiriya Upaniṣad (2.1.1) there is the enigmatic statement that truth, knowledge, the infinite, and brahman are located in the cave (guhāyām) and the highest heaven (parama vyomān). It appears that here we have the juxtaposition and, therefore, the identification of the cave of

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⁷. For a study of the term ānanda in ancient Indian literature, see Oliveulle (1997b).
the heart with the space of the highest heaven. The image of the heart as a
cave appears again in the rather late Kaṭha (1.14). In explaining the fire-altar
bearing the name of Naciketas, Death says that “it lies hidden in the cave of
the heart” (etaṁ nīhitam guhāyām). Later the Kaṭha (3.1) locates that altar
in two parallel spaces, “the highest region beyond” (parama parārdhe) and
“the cave (of the heart)” (guhā). Finally, the Kaṭha (4.6–7) locates the highest
divinity within the heart:

He who was born before heat,
who before the waters was born,
who has seen through living beings—
Entering the cave (of the heart),
[one sees] him abiding there.
She who comes into being with breath,
Aditi, who embodies divinity,
who was born through living beings—
Entering the cave (of the heart),
[one sees] her abiding there.

\[ \text{yah pūrvan tapaso jātām adbhyaḥ pūrvam ajāyata |} \\
\text{guhām praviśya tiṣṭhantam yo bhūtebhīr vyapāyata ||} \\
\text{yā prāṇena saṁbhavati adītir devatānymai |} \\
\text{guhām praviśya tiṣṭhantim yā bhūtebhīr vyajāyata ||} \]

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (3.17), likewise, locates the highest brahman with-
in the cave of the heart:

It is large, heavenly, of inconceivable form;
yet it appears more minute than the minute.
It is farther than the farthest,
yet it is here at hand;
It is right here within those who see,
hidden within the cave (of their heart).

\[ \text{byḥac ca tad divyam acintyarūpaṁ sūkṣmāc ca tat sūkṣmataraṁ vibhāti |} \\
\text{dūrāt sudīre tad ihāntike ca paśyatsv ihaṁva nīhitam guhāyām ||} \]

As Bodewitz (1991, 21–22) has noted, this connection between the heart and
the quest for the immortal is prefigured already by earlier texts that locate
the sun, the locus of immortality, within the heart: “In later Vedic litera-
ture the sun in the heart again appears and then denotes the immortal part of man, the soul. The *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 6, 34 identifies the bird in the heart with the bird in the sun”.

Within a more strictly yogic context, the *Śvetāśvatara* (7.8) depicts the control of the senses and the mind as withdrawing them into the heart, a conception already present in the earlier texts within the context of sleep and death. The context here is more theistic, and the person within the heart is identified with God, who should be worshipped as abiding in one’s heart. So the *Śvetāśvatara* (3.13) says:

The Person the size of a thumb abiding within the body always resides within the hearts of people. With the heart, with insight, with thought has he been contemplated. Those who know this become immortal.

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āṅguṣṭhamātrataḥ puruṣo 'ntarātmā sadā janānāṁ hṛdaye sanātiniṣṭah
hṛdā maniśā manasaḥbhiklāpti ya etat vidur amṛtāṁ te bhavant ||
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CONCLUSION

The heart emerged in the Upaniṣadic thought as a central element in the explanatory schemes for the human psycho-somatic personality and for its connection to cosmic realities. The central role of the heart in human cognition remained a constant feature in later Indian thought. As late a text as Vidyāranya’s *Jivanmuktiveka*\(^8\) takes as a given that the human mind (*manas*) is physically located within the heart.

The central question, however, remains: why did the heart assume such a central position at this particular period of Indian intellectual and religious history? I want to leave this as a real question rather than a prelude to an answer. One possible avenue for investigation, however, may be the changing conceptions of the self and its immortality around the time of the *Upaniṣads* and the rise of the new religions along the Gangetic valley. In a paper I wrote about the immortality of women (Olivelle 1997a), I used a typology of self proposed by Michael Carrithers, who uses the French terms to make a useful distinction between *personne* and *moi*. This distinction may be helpful also in understanding the changing views of the heart. Carrithers (1985, 235-36) defines *personne* as “a conception of the individual

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human being as a member of a (1) significant and (2) ordered collectivity
cia mio as "a conception of (1) the physical and mental individuality of
human beings within (2) a natural or spiritual cosmos, and (3) interacting
with each other as moral agents".

I think the new theologies emerging in northern India around the mid-
dle of the first millennium BCE reflected in both the *Upanishads* and the
theologies of new religions such as Buddhism show a movement from the
conception of the human individual as personne to that of moi. Within the
theory of rebirth and *karma*, as well as in the emerging psychologies that
sought to explain the processes of thinking-emotion, sleep, dream, and the
after-death condition, the individual comes to be viewed increasingly as
insular, self-contained, and unique. The differing conceptions of the self
influenced differing conceptions of what it means to die, to survive death,
and to become immortal and produced several technologies for attaining
immortality. The most prominent of these is the cluster that falls under the
umbrella of Yoga, technologies of introspection, mental cultivation, and
psycho-somatic control. These technologies also gave rise to differing psychol-
ogies that attempted to locate and describe both the self and the mental
processes.

The combination of the new conception of the self as moi, a unique
and irrepetible individual that transcends death and birth, and the new
technologies of mental cultivation, I think, may have contributed to the
view that the heart is the internal space where the self and mental facul-
ties operate, a space comparable to the outer space of everyday activities.
Whereas the outer space is the arena of dissipated and distracting activi-
ties, an arena where senses run amuck like horses, the inner space is the
ocean of deep and calm water, the true cave in which mental cultivation
and serenity can develop. It is this serene self within the heart that
one should know, says the *Katha Upanishad* (6.17) and knowing which one
becomes immortal:

> A person the size of a thumb in the body (*atman*),
always resides within the hearts of men;
One should draw him out of the body with determination,
like a reed from the grass sheath;
One should know him
as immortal and bright.

*aṅgusthamātrah puruṣo 'ntarātmā
sādā janānāh īḍdaye saṁnivīśṭah*
tam svāc charirāt pravṝhen
muṇjād ivesikām dhairyeva |
tam vidyāc chukram anṝtam ||

And within the theistic context of the Śvetāśvātara (4.20), the heart is where the Lord abides and where the self unites with the Lord — reminiscent of the union of the female and the male within the heart in the explicitly sexual imagery of the Brhadāraṇyaka:

His appearance is beyond the range of sight; no one can see him with his sight. He who knows him as such with his heart, with his mind — him, who abides in the heart — becomes immortal.

na sanidraś tiṣṭhati rūpam asya na caksuśa paśyati kaś canaixam |
hṛdā hṛdireśabhiḥ manasā ya enam evam vidur anṝtās te bhavanti ||

REFERENCES


