

## The Making of Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Commentary

A brief history of Guru Nitya's massive Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Project, culled from his letters in *Love and Blessings*, followed by the recollections of Nancy Yeilding, who, as the primary amanuensis, guided the enterprise to completion.

Nancy                                      Bangalore, India                                      March 10, 1991

I was writing an introduction to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary written by a friend of mine. It was heavy work but very enjoyable. It soaked my soul in the deepest purity of Upanishadic wisdom. After completing the work it was as if I have returned to the world of name and form from the thin air of transcendence. Noisy auto rickshaws make everything reverberate. That does not disturb my inner peace.

Nancy                                      Fernhill, India                                      July 17, 1991

Now we are into the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In fact I started on it in 1952 when I first came to the Gurukula in Fernhill. After thirty-nine years I've commenced writing its commentary. It is coming out very well.

Nancy                                      Fernhill, India                                      August 14, 1991

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is coming out as well as the Isavasya Upanishad did. I'm only afraid that there won't be anyone with me to take down my dictation each morning. The next four months I'll be traveling. Only Thampan and Prince take down my English dictation. They can keep pace with me only if I say each word separately. The gestaltation of my inner vision comes with a torrential speed that will not wait for them. So I'm at a loss. Another possibility is tape recording the morning and the evening speeches for someone to transcribe. It may take two or three years for me to comment on the entire text, but at the very outset the

Upanishad teaches how to transcend death. So I don't have to worry about the time I have before me to finish my commentary.

Sraddha                      Kerala, India                      November 2, 1991

These days I am soaked in the dreams of the Upanishads. Once it was religious literature for me. Then it became philosophical visions. Presently each presentation of it has become a lyrical envisioning of the beauty of life.

Peter O.                      Fernhill, India                      February 8, 1992

The Upanishad class gives good ventilation to parochial and distant outlooks. Now we can send our thoughts beyond millions of years and forget and forgive local histories. So far we are impressed with the praxis of myths, which are more reasonable than classical science or quantum conundrums. We are filling up the gaps of mystical and philosophical visions that are over three to four thousand years old. It is like hovering beyond conceivable space and occasionally banishing the time that clings to calendars and diaries.

No doubt is left whatsoever of the overall epistemological and methodological requirements of mathematical and mystical truth. Poetry stands in good stead to soothe all irregular angularities. Ancient rishis chuckle and sit around us like schoolboys. When they leave the premises after each morning and night's classes, there is an aroma of their dreams in the atmosphere.

Sraddha                      Fernhill, India                      June 1992

Last night I had a dream of a fairy who gave me a gift of a magical device that was like a bead of jade, flattened, which I could insert between two pages and see the poetic quality of all the words, illuminated with florescent colors. It was as if each vowel was giving a musical dimension to the word printed on the paper. I

played with it all night.... The Upanishad assures me that you can get any such precious gift by just meditating on it.

Debbie                                      Fernhill, India                                      September 23, 1993

We are passing though some very interesting lessons of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. It is as if the rishi is giving a running commentary of life. Very dispassionately and candidly. Now I understand why Leibnitz said this is the best of all possible worlds which God has made. In the Upanishadic set up, God is an intermediary and not the Supreme Managing Director. So he has limitations.

Friends of the Gurukula              Fernhill, India                                      October 15, 1993

For more than forty years I was preparing to write a commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. After meditating on each mantra and studying the notes and comments of others with intense tapas, the work is now getting slowly finished.

Nancy                                      Fernhill, India                                      February 27, 1994

The Malayalam version of the first volume [Brihadaranyaka Upanishad] has frightened some readers, and all my readers are at least overwhelmed. Considering the inspirational thoughts that have gone into the second volume, the first volume is like a robust baby. I myself feel quite proud of the accomplishment in the second volume, especially in the Malayalam version. The pride and excitement we shared at the conclusion of each mantra is something I will be missing when I dictate to someone else.

Sraddha                                      Fernhill, India                                      July 1994

By now Nancy must have received the first twelve Brahmanas of the Khila Kanda. I would like to hear from both of you whether you approve of my present free style of rendering it.

As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad itself proclaims that the Khila Kanda is an uncharted area of human spiritual adventure, I'm taking freedom to be a pioneer in the field of the ultimate spiritual sadhanas to be performed. It gives me great satisfaction.

Peter O.                      Konni, India                      September 30, 1994

I hope to be back in Fernhill from October 4th with Sraddha and Jyothi. Maybe with Sraddha's help I can give a finish to the third volume of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. With that perhaps I can bring my swadharma as a teacher and writer to a close.

Jayaletchimy                      Fernhill, India                      November 13, 1994

In January I shall send you the second volume of the Upanishad. That one single book can give you more knowledge than ten universities put together. This is a tall claim, but when you read it, you will be convinced that it's not too tall.

Debbie                      Konni, India                      December 20, 1994

Finally volume two of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad came out with a bang. It looks formidable and provocative. I paid the printer 59,000 rupees and have to pay 40,000 more. But God is not in any terrible haste to pay bills.

Peter O.                      Fernhill, India                      March 12, 1995

Now is a great time, when both Sraddha and Nancy are here, and we're taking our turns to milk as much as we can from the celestial cow, Kamadevi, otherwise called Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Nancy is the calf, and I am the milkman. Nancy also gives mouthfuls to Sraddha. The computer is our processing machine to get the butter out of it. From English it is also channeled into Malayalam. Unlike the previous chapters, this one is for the actualizing of Upanishadic values. Each mantra is followed by an exercise to transform the age-old crudeness of our

psyche so that it can bring forth new branches on which come fresh blossoms and spiritually sumptuous fruits.

Friends of the Gurukula      Fernhill, India      January 1, 1997

For the last five years I have been a prisoner of love and devotion, contemplating on every mantra of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which is the largest of the lot of Upanishads. To write the commentary I was obliged to talk in two tongues, English and Malayalam. I wasn't just translating the mantras in these languages, it was like experiencing the intimation of immortality with the dear friends of the West in English, and of the East in Malayalam, fully charged with Sanskrit idioms, allegories and poetry.

Entering into the deep waters of the Upanishad was like leaving the shores of this familiar world and going into the Unknown. Every word of every mantra was an eye opener. Usually the initiation given by a master to a novice is for only once in a lifetime. For me, living the contemplative ecstasy of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad was like experiencing a new initiation every day. I was blessed with the envisioning of the magical vista of the rishi's world, which was at once sublime and deep. My spiritual comrades of the Fernhill Gurukula, and also of the American centers, worked with me with great patience and prepared the final camera-ready copies to be printed in 1994, 1995 and 1996.

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The letters inspired Nancy Yeilding to expand on her role in the project, written to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group. The non-italicized terms given below are from the Guru's commentary,

in which he outlines approaches and disciplines needed to overcome the many stumbling blocks to fearlessness:

*In 1992 I spent March through May in India with Guru. As the letters above indicate, he was already engaged in writing the commentary, and some of the text had already been taken down and word-processed. When I arrived we both plunged into the work. Thus I was gifted with yet another profound opportunity for both consistent study of wisdom teachings and maintenance of intimate relationship with a most insightful guide. I would take dictation during the classes, then edit what I had taken down, then type it on the computer, and edit it again. Although I did edit and re-edit the text for grammar and punctuation and to confirm the Sanskrit, every class was a wonder, delivered as an intact whole, which Guru didn't need to revisit or amend.*

*I still marvel at Guru's capacity to ponder and loosely translate the mantra, then close the book, close his eyes, and speak for an hour or more uninterruptedly. He used to say that his dictation was relating to us what he was seeing like a vista spread out before him. One class a day would be in English, the other would be a dictation on the same text in Malayalam. With awe, we received the clear distillation of his forty years of contemplation on the Upanisad. At the end of each class, I would read out what I had taken down and he and I would look into each other's eyes with a shared sense of reverence, wonder, and gratitude. This is how the beautiful visions that have been inspiring and guiding all of us as we have journeyed through the forest together, came into being, mantra after mantra.*

*At the end of three months I returned to Bainbridge with most of the first volume on the precious disks that I carried with me, and then uploaded to my computer. We had already contracted with*

*D.K. Printworld in New Delhi to publish the book. However, concerned about how many errors might creep in if they typeset it, I proposed that I would provide them with camera-ready copy of the page layout of the text. I had already been using page layout software to create a digital page layout of the English Gurukulam magazine, so I felt confident. However, I soon learned that the precise attention required to design the book and then properly place every page heading, not to mention correcting the word-spacing, line by line, of every page of a 650 page book was of another order altogether! I was just able to complete the work on the first volume by the time I returned to India in early 1993.*

*Before I had left Guru the year before, he had solemnly looked into my eyes and asked, “Will you give me a year? Then I can finish dictating my Brhadaranyaka commentary to you.” I agreed, not really knowing how I would manage it, but, back at Bainbridge, along with preparing the manuscript, I also continued working full time, gave notice at my job, interviewed, hired, and trained my replacement, continued teaching weekly classes at the Gurukula, made arrangements for the care of the Gurukula and the printing of Gurukulam Magazine, earned enough money for a round trip ticket and returned in March of 1993. Before I left at the end of 1993, the second volume was ready for the digital page layout process. As Guru handed me a copy of the first volume inscribed with an expression of his gratitude and love, I received it with an overflowing heart. He said: “Who knows where this will lead for you?” One of those questions that is also a blessing, the answers to which keep unfolding.*

*The production process also gave me the opportunity to explore befriending disease, although at first we were not on friendly terms at all. The intensity of the combination of full time paid work (with extensive computer use), work on Gurukulam, and the detailed*

*work on the page layout of a second 650 page volume resulted in a severe repetitive motion injury to my right arm and a less severe one to my left arm, causing almost constant numbness and pain. I saw more than one doctor in the course of learning what was the matter and seeking a remedy, somewhat frantically.*

*When I realized that the only real medical recourse was an operation, that prompted a psychic pause. Resolved not to go for that option, I calmed down and invited wisdom in, including detachment and neutrality. I stopped giving so much mental and psychic “air time” to the pain and numbness and panic. I knew the cause, which hinted at the remedy, so I realized I didn’t need to stay so focused on it and certainly wasn’t benefiting from fighting, fearing, or bemoaning it! After the big push to complete the second volume so that it could be published by the end of 1994, I could reduce my computer time somewhat. For the third (thankfully shorter) volume, which Guru dictated to me in February and March of 1995, Sraddha and others were there to help with the typing. I was relieved to discover that, once the overuse tapered down, my body started to recover and the symptoms reduced.*

*When the third volume was completed, Guru said, “Now I have said everything I wanted to say.” I understood that he didn’t just mean in relation to the Upanisad. He had translated and commented on (in English and Malayalam) all of Narayana Guru’s major compositions as well as several Upanisads and Patanjali’s Yoga Sastra, completed his magnificent multi-volume commentary on the Gita in Malayalam, and written and taught so much more. There was such a fulsome feeling behind that sentence. And even beyond the “saying,” was how he had lived, how he had given us all an ever-shimmering illustration of what it means to combine these two instructions: “Be adequate always...pool all your resources and take full advantage of the amenities of nature*



given to you...the means to accomplish and the correct meaning to give your own life.” “There is only one life. We all live the one meaning given to life as a whole which we can poetically refer to as the purpose in the scheme of cosmic creation.”