

The Eeshopanishad

ईशोपनिषद्

The First Upanishad

A contemporary translation

By

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बठरतुतु अलुदरलतुन तुलतुतु अडडलतुतुतुतु

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To

*my Lord, Eesha,
for none of this would be possible
without His divine grace.*

“If all the Upanishads and all the other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the Eeshopanishad were left in the memory of the Hindus, Hinduism would live forever.”

- Mahatma Gandhi

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Preface

My interest in the Hindu scriptures goes back to early childhood. My mother was a devout Hindu woman. She introduced me to reading simple scriptures early in my childhood. Then, it was a simple recitation of text. I would ask my mother questions regarding theological content. She would say only that I must read more and then I would find the answer. I would ask our family priest¹ the same questions, but he would not know any better.

¹ The practicing Hindu priest is usually a priest by virtue of being born into the Brahman caste, not by education. For most of them it is a mere vocation, thus they focus more on performing rituals rather than explaining scriptures.

As I grew up, the rigors of my scientific education, all the way through my doctoral studies, put my scriptural studies on hold for a while. Then, as I found more free time, once again the study of scriptures took a renewed interest. It took on special meaning after my son became a Cub Scout and wanted to earn a Hindu religious badge, similar to the ones offered for Christianity and various other groups, but we found that none was available. I founded the North American Hindu Association to help Hindu children become aware of their religious roots through the scouting program. Most parents want to teach their children about their cultural and religious roots, and as the number of Hindu children in the North America continues to rise, this quest to let them know about our spiritual heritage has become even more important.

Numerous translations of the Eeshopanishad exist. For the purpose of our discussion, we can divide these into two categories: those written by non-practicing Hindus, notably western scholars, and those written by practicing Hindus.

As I read many of these, I tried to keep one question in mind: If my own children were to read this, would they understand it? I found the texts by western scholars, although written in excellent academic style and format, to be completely devoid of spiritual content. Lacking in faith and conviction, their translations of Sanskrit mantras, although grammatically correct, often missed the point and at times were comical – clearly not the divine intent. When I read the texts by Hindu swamis – including some in Indian languages, often complete with Sanskrit text – I found them written with total faith, brilliant interpretation, and sophisticated spiritual discussion,

with excellent cross-references to other scriptures. Unfortunately they assumed a certain level of background on the part of the reader – and often, quite a bit of a background necessary to follow even a single passage. At times, they did try to provide the necessary explanations; however, with typical Indian zeal, a single word or a sentence often took up an entire chapter – keeping the attention of only the most ardent and loyal reader.

So, in this book, I have made an attempt to bridge the gap between the two. In addition to translations, many scholars and theologians have written commentaries on this Upanishad. Among these, the commentaries by Shankaracharya and Madhvacharya are foremost. It would be arrogant of me to consider even an essay on the Eeshopanishad without reference to these great theologians' work. Indeed, I have taken refuge in the

commentaries by these great Hindu saint-scholars, and included summaries of their interpretations throughout the translation.

Section I of this book, "About the Text" begins with a rather brief introduction to indicate the relative position of the Eeshopanishad in the corpus of the Hindu scriptures. These words, which are key to understanding the Eeshopanishad, are given somewhat detailed treatment in the chapter titled Basic Eeshopanishad Vocabulary.

Section II, "About the Commentaries," begins with an overview of Hindu theology. This small volume of a scripture is quite involved theologically, and the great saints hold differing points of view. It is clearly beyond the scope of this work to present all of the available viewpoints, but the two most notable ones are from Shankaracharya and Madhvacharya. Section II

includes their brief biographies as context for the presentation of their differing interpretations of this Upanishad. As far as I know, this is the first time that the Eeshopanishad has been presented with views from the two ends of Vedanta philosophy. My hope is that reading very brief outlines of the lives of these two great souls will inspire one to read more about them and their other works at a later stage.

Section III is the shortest section of this book: the Eeshopanishad itself. It consists of a recitational Sanskrit version of the entire 18-mantra text, and, in the adjacent column, my complete English translation.

Section IV- It is suggested that the reader become familiar with the introductory material before proceeding to Section IV, "The Eeshopanishad with Commentaries." In this section, I provide a detailed translation and

analysis of each mantra, including commentaries from the great acharyas, which I have tried to keep reasonably brief. The reader will notice that I have taken the liberty to indulge a bit more with later mantras – with the optimistic view that the reader will find it easier to comprehend later commentaries having gone over the earlier ones.

To make this book comprehensible even to those who do not have a deep background of Hindu scriptures, I have explained new words in the body of the text or in footnotes. I hope that those who are familiar with these terms will find these notes useful as a refresher. While reading the mantras, it may be helpful to refer repeatedly to the Basic Eeshopanishad Vocabulary section until each key word, with its multiple meanings, becomes a “natural” one.

There are six appendices presented in this book. The first one Appendix A lists Eeshopanishad Mantra Characteristics. During the course of writing this book, I found it interesting to listen to these mantras recited. In Appendix B, I have presented the six systems of Hindu philosophy. This is necessary to understand the relative position of this scripture. It is my hope that the reader will find the alphabetical index of all the deities mentioned in this book in Appendix C useful and interesting. Next, I have provided a guide to Sanskrit pronunciation in Appendix D. This is by no means meant as a ‘teach yourself Sanskrit in one easy lesson.’ English has no equivalent for certain words, some of which are notorious for changing their meaning according to context. Appendix E has some common usage of the word Eesha in Hindu names. Additional Sanskrit terms are defined in the Glossary, which is Appendix F.

At certain places, the line spacing appears uneven. This is due to the use of Sanskrit script fonts with Roman script fonts.

Hindu scriptures generally do not contain index. I hope that the reader would find alphabetical entries in Section I - Basic Eeshopanishad Vocabulary, Appendix C - Hindu Gods and Goddesses, names in Appendix E. Eesha and Appendix F - Glossary a reasonable substitute for the index. I have included illustrations of selected deities and made appropriate notations. I would hope that the reader would find them visually appealing as well as an aid in visualizing that deity mentioned in the text.

The traditional scriptures are written in a 'narrow landscape' format, generally known as pothi (literally meaning a book). Pages are usually not bound or numbered but tied together with a sacred thread. I have presented

this book in a 'pothi' format but with bound and numbered pages. I hope this give the reader that 'feel' of reading a scripture in a more authentic way. I hope that reading or rereading this book will give sufficient background and provide inspiration for reading and understanding other basic scriptures. My hope is that if at some point a reader feels interested enough to pick up another text of a Hindu scripture, or even feels like rereading the same passage again and again to understand the underlying concept of faith and devotion a little better, I would be elated at having achieved even that much.

My thanks are due to the following Sanskrit and scriptures scholars for their astute and critical reviews. Their constructive criticism put the finishing touches on the manuscript. Any errors that remain are attributable to me.

Shasthriji Shivkumar Bhat, Head Priest, Hindu Temple of Canton, Canton, Michigan, USA; Prof. Ramanuja Devanathan, Principal, Rajiv Gandhi Campus, Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, Shringeri, Karnataka, India; and Prof. Mukund L Wadekar, Director, Oriental Institute, M.S. University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. Shasthriji Shivkumar Bhat who has a degree in Yajur Veda proved to be not only an ideal but able source for me to learn to recite the Eeshopanishad mantras. The contribution of my two scholar friends Mr. Harivadan Kapadia and Mr. Thakore Sunderwala is acknowledged in initial readings.

Finally, I would be totally amiss if I did not thank two important women in my life. My journalist and scholar daughter Minal Hajratwala (author: 2009 - Leaving India - published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, USA and 2010 by Tranquebar Press, Westland-Tata, India) for going through the entire

manuscript line by line, both English and Sanskrit. She was largely responsible for bringing the manuscript to the level that could be understood by 'novice' by constantly asking - what does it mean? To my wife Bhanu for her continued support with not only this but other projects as well by reading them to make sure they were 'understandable'.

This book is dedicated to the Lord, Eesha, for to dedicate it to anyone else would very clearly show that the writer has merely translated the work and not really understood anything. For being able to even attempt, let alone complete this book, I am forever indebted to the Lord, Eesha, for nothing but nothing is possible without His divine grace.

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