

A Review of How to Attain Enlightenment

Ram (James Swartz)

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Tired of the line “There is no ‘you’ to do anything”? Those days are over. Finally, we have a real, traditional Vedanta teacher, a dyed-in-the-wool Shankara Vedantin who has been studying and teaching scripture for forty years, since his self-realization in his late twenties under the discipleship of Swami Chinmayananda in India. James Swartz is not like the others; he will not tell you there is no “you” – quite the contrary. First he’ll tell you to grow up and get qualified. According to traditional Vedanta – a teaching that actually works, as opposed to the vague, uninformed fluff that passes itself off as teaching nowadays – you need to get qualified for self-inquiry, and you need to apply a means, and it takes time and effort. There is quite a bit of “doing” involved.

Swartz’s book will affirm rather than deny what you instinctively know: that there is a person having experiences and suffering in ignorance. The person is not real in the sense of being eternal and unchanging, but he does exist. He is able to seek, mature, clean up his lifestyle, grow spiritually and finally hear the highest message of the scripture from the level it is intended to be heard: from Self to Self. Swartz gives you a detailed road map for accomplishing all of this. Aren’t you about ready for a map? I know I was.

Swartz skillfully leads you through an incredible amount of complicated material, step by step, demystifying it and making it relevant to what you experience as a seeker. He builds a larger picture little by little until eventually there emerges a beautiful, shimmering collage of the entirety of creation – the “*mandala* of existence,” as he calls it – the macrocosm and the microcosm, and where “you” fit into this picture. Gradually it all begins to make sense. From there it is a logical progression to the undermining of ignorance and the revelation of Self.

I don’t know where he’s been hiding all these years, but Swartz is certainly a welcome new addition to the spiritual line-up. As many people are finding out, the popular non-dual writings, while helpful in terms of eliminating false notions, are simply not effective in revealing the Self. The revelation of the Self requires a structured and logically consistent method, and Vedanta is such a method. Of course popular thought holds that there is no “you” to utilize a method, but that wholesale denial of the relative level of existence has proven ineffective and left a lot of people frustrated. Swartz is one of the biggest critics of these “neo” ideas, and he doesn’t hesitate to tell you about it. A chapter in his book is devoted to the subject.

As far as I know, Swartz is the only self-realized Westerner teaching Vedanta from such a deep-rooted understanding of it. Because he realized at such a young age, he has had an entire lifetime of studying scripture and honing his teaching skills. He travels the world to teach, and still spends a good part of every year teaching in India. The depth of his knowledge of Vedanta and Vedic texts is impressive. And yet English is his native language, and he is as American as apple pie. So there is nothing lost in translation, as is so often the case with the ancient wisdom. Swartz’s circumstances of birth and self-realization make him uniquely a fortuitous bridge from East to West, and if the West is ready for Vedanta, Swartz is the guy.

After you read the book, I would highly recommend any of Swartz’s DVD collections

available at his website *ShiningWorld.com*. They take you more deeply into the material and fully explain things that are introduced in the book. Swartz's style is casual and engaging, and his intelligence and grasp of the material he teaches is evident.

Swartz has a brilliant mind, and he is also a devotee. He loves Vedanta with all his heart, and it shows. He explains and translates *Upanishads* and other texts in a way that brings them alive. I never understood a single word of scripture before I listened to Swartz explain it. Now I love the scripture. He removes the hyperbole which made it seem irrelevant to me. For instance, he'll read something like, "the Eternal Supreme Shining One," and explain simply: "That means you."

James Swartz revealed Vedanta to me, and Vedanta revealed the Self. It would not have been possible without Swartz and his lifelong dedication to this work. I hope you find his book to be helpful to attaining your goal of Self-realization. I highly recommend it.