

# The Logic of Vedanta

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## ***The Essence of Enlightenment - The Big Picture***

Because suffering is unnatural and freedom is natural to us, everyone seeks freedom knowingly or unknowingly. The universal desire to remove the nagging sense of low self-worth that dogs our days on earth has created a perennial enlightenment culture. Just as the development of sophisticated scientific, psychological and literary cultures that serve human's material and social needs takes centuries, the spiritual need for freedom from limitation stretches back to the beginning of human consciousness. Vedanta, the science of consciousness and the grandfather of all enlightenment traditions, is an independent, scientific, complete body of knowledge that connects the human heart to the non-dual factor – some call it God – that melts the apparently separate elements that comprise the Creation into a conscious, non-dual loving whole.

Though non-dual thinkers appeared from time to time in the West, a spiritual culture centered around the idea of non-duality never evolved. Consequently, the Western spiritual world is a hodgepodge of initially appealing but ultimately conflicting dual and non-dual notions and practices that eventually fade, leaving the heart hungry for release from the thrall of matter. Since the sixties' invasion of *swamis* and *lamas* from the East kick-started the idea of enlightenment in the West, three generations of seekers have worked diligently on themselves and are well prepared to understand the counter-intuitive and radical message of traditional Vedanta – to wit appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, reality is non-dual consciousness. What this means and how it benefits human beings in their quest for freedom from limitation is the subject matter of *The Essence of Enlightenment* by James Swartz, which demystifies the topic of enlightenment as it unfolds the positive vision of the non-dual nature of reality.

Because any undertaking benefits from a clear blueprint, the quest for freedom and non-dual love begins with a rigorous analysis of the basic human pursuits – security, pleasure, virtue, power, fame and knowledge – and reveals the fact that we don't actually want what we think we want. Instead, we want freedom from the fears and desires that compel us to pursue worldly goals, which upon analysis prove to be zero-sum goals.

The appreciation of the inherently frustrating nature of worldly pursuits often kick-starts an interest in spiritual goals and sometimes nudges our lives toward an inner solution. We begin to question why we are encased in strange decaying meat tubes, which initiates the quest for freedom from mortality, meaning change. Unfortunately, we soon discover that the spiritual world is a vast marketplace of bizarre ideas and strange practices that promise easy *nirvanas* and instant epiphanies meant to set us free but which, like the worldly pursuits we are escaping, actually preserve rather than remove our sense of dissatisfaction. In the second chapter of this best-selling insightful book James Swartz debunks the dualistic enlightenment myths that lurk like hidden crocodiles in the swamp of modern spirituality.

*The Essence of Enlightenment*, however, is not only a rational exposé of many

illogical notions that pass for spiritual knowledge today but carefully reveals the simple reason why, contrary to conventional wisdom, our desire to unthinkingly act our way out of our existential predicament is a symptom of a deeper problem, our ignorance of the nature of reality. The limited incomplete self that we are trying to escape is not actually limited in any way, a fact that can only be remedied by rational investigation.

The next stage of the quest for enlightenment is an inquiry into knowledge, since it alone removes ignorance, i.e. beliefs and opinions about the nature of the material world, our psychological selves and the immortal transcendent factor, our ever-present existent consciousness that stands apart from our minds and bodies. Just as knowledge of the material world is produced by inquiry into matter, the knowledge of our eternal uncreated non-dual nature is produced by Vedanta, the science of Self-inquiry. Chapter III discusses the factors involved in gaining Self-knowledge: the need of an independent impersonal proven means of knowledge, the qualifications necessary to gain it – discrimination, dispassion, desire for freedom, etc. – and the importance of a wise teacher capable of wielding the means of knowledge effectively, not to mention the grace of God.

Chapter V unfolds the teachings on our ever-present, unborn, eternal, actionless, unconcerned identity as limitless awareness. It shows that our essential Self is the goodness beyond good and bad and that the beauty of this Creation – the sun, moon, stars and amazing sentient beings – is just a pale reflection of our innate unborn beauty. Because we are non-separate from existence itself, we are everything that is. And because you love yourself more than anything, you cannot exclude the world from your love.

The knowledge of the Self sits roughly in the middle of the complete train of logic that constitutes Vedanta, the vision of non-duality. If you fail to appreciate your beginningless blissful nature, fear not. The second half of the book unfolds the nature of the obstacles that prevent the assimilation of your limitlessness and provides proven methods for removing them.

It begins with an analysis of the unconscious mind, the part of the Self that recycles experience. Desires and fears motivate actions, which create subconscious tendencies that generate more fears and desires, which cause bondage to action. Life gradually becomes a swirling whirlpool of repetitive duties and obligations as the personality becomes alienated, boring and unimaginative. Its escapes into society's supermarket of distractions, chemical and otherwise, soon become subject to the same unconscious power, adding another layer of conditioning to an already burdened mind. Instead of focusing on the eternal ever-present bliss of the Self, the mind becomes hopelessly extroverted and frantically tries to fulfill itself by squeezing fleeting blisses from thoughts, feelings and situations over which it has virtually no control. The joy of every gain is neutralized by the fear of its loss.

To reverse this cycle and liberate the mind from the subconscious pressure to act, Vedanta teaches the secret of *karma yoga*, which is unfolded with great clarity. Instead of seeking to escape from the world, a committed practitioner reorients his or her thinking around a different principle, based on a common-sense analysis of the nature of action and its results and a deep appreciation of the moral laws controlling the field of action. Divested of the attitude that causes stress and other dysfunctional emotions, the mind relaxes and, attracted to the bliss of the Self as it reflects in a quiet mind, it is now qualified for Vedanta, the practice of Self-inquiry, which reorients the mind behind the non-dual principle.

Vedanta is a three-stage process that yokes the heart and mind – *yoga* means “to yoke, or join” – to the non-dual principle and eventually sets it free of its attachment to objects, not objects themselves. Objects are anything other than the ever-present conscious Self. They include thoughts, desires, fears, fantasies, dreams, memories, living beings and inert material objects. The obvious but unappreciated principle on which it is based is: you are not the objects you experience. You are the ever-free, unborn, blissful Self, endowed with free will, which is always experienced as the “I.” You are not a pre-determined notional self that is cobbled together out of a long sequence of experiences, real and imagined, that happened to your body and mind since birth.

The first stage, hearing, involves listening to the teachings without bias, a difficult feat for a mind conditioned to a plethora of unexamined beliefs and opinions, which pass for knowledge. The second stage involves examining one’s beliefs and opinions in light of the knowledge of reality and discarding those that are not in harmony with it. The third involves actualizing Self-knowledge, the result of which is that a person becomes completely satisfied with what fate brings. He or she is not elated when good fortune arrives or depressed when it leaves. The final chapter is devoted to explaining the characteristics of a Self-actualized person, someone who sees no differences between himself and others and loves life in all its forms. And finally, he or she unconditionally loves his or her small transactional self, warts and all.

This unique provocative book also contains chapters that discuss the secondary but necessary requirements for gaining enlightenment. One explores the relationship between existence/consciousness and the eternal devotee in each of us. It presents methods for converting disturbing emotions produced by attachment to transitory objects into the highest form of devotion, unchanging non-dual love. Another explains the value of values as it unfolds the relationship between the nature of the individual, universal values and situational ethics. Another unique chapter presents proven ancient techniques that sublimate negative energies into the higher states of mind required necessary the successful discrimination that is the hallmark of a liberated person.