

A READER'S REVIEW **THE ESSENCE OF GRACE**

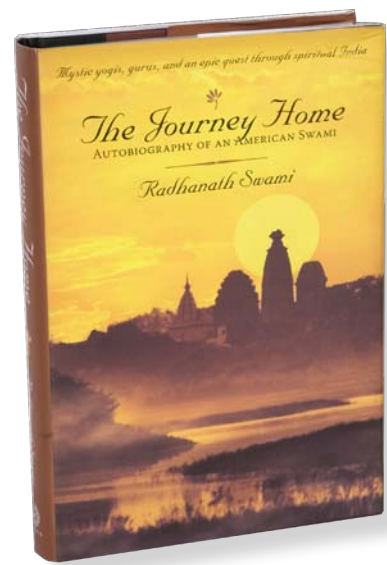
Mystic yogis, gurus, and an epic quest through Spiritual India

THE JOURNEY HOME

Autobiography of an American Swami

BY RADHANATH SWAMI

RACHAEL STARK®



RADHANATH SWAMI IS A DIMINUTIVE, gentle, and yet, nonetheless, immensely powerful man, his appearance at once illuminating and also beguiling. Clad in a soft-hued, saffron-colored robe, his slender frame barely visible beneath the folds of cloth, he walks soundlessly, and yet, when speaking to his audience, addresses each and every member with conviction.

Recently, Radhanath Swami spoke in New York City, at the Bhakti Center and at Ashtanga Yoga New York, reading from his recent, unforgettable book, *The Journey Home, Autobiography Of An American Swami*. Amid the city's bustling activity—the ever-present whir and rush of the holiday season—in a biting and deepening cold, Radhanath Swami delighted and warmed those who came to hear him, New Yorkers from all walks of life—devotees of Krishna, yogis, avid readers, all who could fill the space and sit in his presence.

Appearing shy at first—having to lean into the microphone to be heard, adjusting his cushion for several moments, and seemingly, with great effort, transporting himself from a profound and personal silence before speaking, Radhanath Swami recounted the vivid, devotional migration that transformed him from Richard Slavin, a suburban Jewish youth lost in the throes of the 1960s counter-culture, into a spiritual leader, confiding in each and every member of the audience as if we were all participants—intimate friends sharing the most memorable of journeys.

PUT SUCCINCTLY, RADHANATH SWAMI'S life has been and continues to be one of epic dimensions. As a child born and unwillingly thrown into the malaise and alienation of suburban Chicago life in the 1960s, he was much too often a first-hand witness of and victim of great injustices. As he quietly recounted in his lecture and wrote in much more harrowing detail in his autobiography, he saw the shame that African-Americans suffered in the American ghetto in a “separate” and “unequal” system, acutely felt the horrors of an unjust war in Vietnam, and could not comfort his soul or sense of righteousness with an easy, material lifestyle and all its supposed trimmings.

Feeling alienated and alone in his sense of both loss and indignation, as a frail, nineteen year-old, the young Richard Slavin turned toward God. Growing his hair long in individual protest, “a statement of discontent,” he marched with Civil Rights leaders for the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr. and protested the Vietnam War at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1970 only to be the victim of tear-gas at the hands of the police and the target of uncontrolled rage as the only “white man” at an African-American civil disobedience demonstration.

At times, during this difficult period of his life he writes in his book that he felt “like an open target for anyone suffering from anger or negativity.” However, what is instrumental was that he did not collapse into despair. Turning to the innate majesty and

beauty of nature, to his inner heart, and to his good friend, Gary Liss, “whose friendship would become a miracle in my life,” he resolved: “If only like the running stream, I just follow my calling... nature may whisper her secrets and guide me to my destiny.”

Thus began the first part of Radhanath Swami's physical journey which led him to travel all over Europe with his friend and ultimately, to sojourn alone to “Mother India.” In person—as he spoke to the hushed audience with the subtle and playful inflections of his voice and his fluid facial expressions—and in his autobiography, he described with humor the most amazing of adventures—meditating with monks in Rome among the secret catacombs and remains of the dead; crashing in a crowded hippy pad in a church basement in Trafalgar Square; playing the Blues on his harmonica next to the legendary Johnny Winter; ultimately sitting in a cave on the Isle of Crete where he had his first spiritual epiphany.

Throughout each and every one of these experiences, Radhanath Swami, (aptly nick-named “Monk” in his late teens—a name that was more a legacy from the nick-name of his older brother on the wrestling team and less ironically, to do with his ultimate destiny) chose to find out “what can I learn from this?” Retelling his first pivotal revelation in front of a live audience and as written in his book, he continually maintained a sense of humility and grace during the most difficult moments.



*Radanath Swami at Sri Sri Radha Gopinath Mandir, ISKCON Chowpatty, Mumbai, India September 2009.
Photograph by Robert Moses.*

In Crete, for example, after weeks of meditation, his best friend Gary one day confides to him, “Monk, something amazing happened to me today.” Radhanath Swami, surprised, replies, “Something amazing happened to me, too.” They look at one another in stunned anticipation. His friend declares, “I... heard a voice as the sun was setting... the voice told [me], ‘Go to Israel.’” Alas, Radhanath Swami, having also heard a voice, admits to his friend, “‘But Gary,’ I whispered, my heart pounding, ‘the voice told me, ‘Go to India.’” And thus, amid the laughter that erupted as he recounted the bewildered expression on his best friend’s face, Radhanath Swami described his realization that his quest was one that he must undertake alone.

THE IMMENSELY DETAILED BOOK, much like Radhanath Swami’s journey and his breathtaking lecture, continues to weave Radhanath Swami’s quest for spiritual knowledge with his steadfast pursuit to reach his homeland. His unwavering intent propels him ultimately to “Mother India” with nothing more than the echo of the voice that commanded him to go there. Assured he will find his way despite the fact that he is literally thousands of miles away from his original home and loved ones, Radhanath Swami arrives in his beloved yet unknown county only to be told by a border official that he will not be allowed into India. Glaring, the official flatly informs him, “We have beggars enough in India. We don’t want another one... You will not enter India. You are rejected. Now go back to where you came from.” Physically exhausted, haggard, destitute and heart-broken, Swami’s only response is one that has continued to characterize his life’s work and achievements, “I knew that I would not turn back... Never once did I dream that entry to India would be denied to me.”

NATURALLY, THIS CONVICTION WAS only the beginning of Swami’s initiation and movement towards his unfolding destiny. The book is far richer and goes into much more depth

about Swami’s multitude of experiences in India and ultimately, his evolution to become a Vaishnava Swami for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

IN SHORT, *THE JOURNEY HOME: Autobiography Of An American Swami*, is as much a delight to read as it is a defining and pivotal literary work of an enlightened being. Readers of all ages and faiths will find unimaginable strength, a wonderful sense of humor, sheer epic adventure, an outpouring of compassion, wisdom, and inspiration in its pages. Not since *Autobiography of A Yogi*, by Paramhansa Yogananda, has such a vivid, intricately penned tale of one man’s triumph of the soul been so beautifully recounted. The only other pleasure is to have the immense good fortune and grace of being present in Radhanath Swami’s company—whether he is reading from his book, merely sitting, or happily recounting one of his stories. As a man of infinite grace, his life and his life story offer all who hear it, infinite wisdom. ❖

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Radhanath Swami talking to Eddie Stern at Ashtanga Yoga New York after a book reading of The Journey Home. December 2009. Photograph by Alessia Elysee.

