

## Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*: A Western Understanding of Buddhism

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**Abstract:** Hesse's *Siddhartha* is considered a fascinating and compelling work of German literature, but its subject matter, the poetic narrative of Buddhism, transcends it to the category of *Weltliteratur* or World Literature and lends it the reputation of an authoritative text for Western understanding of Buddhism. As evident from the title of the work *Siddhartha: Eine indische Dichtung* (*Siddhartha*: An Indian poetic work), it provides an exegesis on Indian Buddhist thought. In *Siddhartha* and in his diary notes, in which he penned down his feelings about Buddhism, Hesse does not speak of a religious Buddhism. One finds here an outright rejection of religious teachings and established religious institutions. Hesse is against any dogmatic view of a spiritual path. One can liberate oneself and discover the *Atman* only by liberating oneself from institutional bondage. His understanding of Buddhism is about exploring the Self. But is this idea not in contradiction with traditional Buddhism, which denies the existence of the Self, the *Atman*, while Hesse's *Siddhartha* lays a greater emphasis on the discovery of the Self, defining it as the purpose of one's life. Hesse portrays the image of a spiritual seeker, but how far is this image in congruence with traditional Buddhism? This paper makes an attempt to address such key issues. The purpose is to identify various themes that are addressed in *Siddhartha* and to critically examine them in view of the understanding of traditional Buddhism. This study is necessitated by the seminal importance of the work, which forms the cornerstone of the discourse on Buddhism in the West. This paper will present qualitative research and adopt thematic and content analysis techniques.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, *Siddhartha*, Hesse, *Atman*, Nirvana

**Introduction:** Two years back, the academia celebrated a profound moment when *Siddhartha*, a literary classic by the Swiss-German writer Hermann Hesse, completed a hundred shining years since its first publication in 1922. In these hundred years, the popularity of *Siddhartha* has grown not just among its readership in the German language, but also in other languages.

Hermann Hesse, an author who would have perhaps remained a less-known literary figure with a restricted German audience, had there not been an English translation of his work *Siddhartha*. This may be ascribed mainly to the themes with which he deals in his work. Unlike other stalwarts of German literature (like Goethe, Lessing, Schiller, etc.), he neither established any literary principle that had any major influence over his successors. His works deal with serious philosophical ideas and present his complex thoughts on those. Thus, he was mainly an author for a serious readership, seeking the truth, like the protagonist Siddhartha in his Nobel prize-winning work *Siddhartha: Eine indische Dichtung*.

It is interesting to note that at the time of its publication, the novel remained a low-key work. Only with its English translation, it later on started gaining popularity. Today, the novel is encouraging millions of people to think about the very basic philosophical question of the meaning of life.

As the title of the novel *Siddhartha: An Indian Work* suggests, it deals with religious practices and philosophical ideas of the subcontinent. Even though some scholars claim that the work reflects the influence of Christianity, there is no denying that at the core of the work lie Buddhism and the Hindu religion.

In the matter of religion in general and of Buddhism and Hindu religion, Hesse is no layman when intellectually venturing in this domain. Being born and brought up in a family of protestant Christian, he had a religious

upbringing since his childhood. He benefited immensely from the prospering German Romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which scholars were dealing with the exotic Indian and Indian philosophic thoughts (Boulby, 1967). The current interest in mystic Indian also brought along translations of important religious and philosophic scriptures (Timpe, 1970). Apart from this, he had also personally visited India and spent a good deal of time understanding the prevalent religious and metaphysical discourse. Thus, he enjoys a unique authority among the European writers on Indian philosophy and lends his novel *Siddhartha* weight to be considered for a sincere comparative analysis with Buddhism and Hindu philosophy.

It is not merely the title and the setting of the novel that call forth its comparative study with Indian philosophic thought. The philosophic ideas propagated here exhibit a clear influence of Vedanta philosophy, especially of the Bhagavad Gita (Timpe, 1970). But it is the life and philosophy of the protagonist of the work *Siddhartha*, which encourages us to further zero down this comparative study with Buddhism. There are strong parallels between the lives of Gautama Buddha and Siddhartha (Schuldermann, 1969). Both are born in affluent families, both leave their houses in search of enlightenment, and nature, in the form of trees and rivers play an important role in their lives in attaining enlightenment. Yet there is a major diversion also. Gautama Buddha left his wife and child in search of enlightenment, while Siddhartha was living the life of ascetics in his search, but his life took a detour and brought him into the company of Kamala, with whom he had a child. Before meeting Kamala, his way crosses with that of Gautama (mentioned as Gotama in the novel). He listens to Gautama, admires his ideas, but does not find enlightenment. These parallels and diversions between the stories of Gautama and Siddhartha make an interesting case for a thematic analysis of the novel to critically analyze the understanding of Buddhism in *Siddhartha*.

**Critique of dogmatic religious beliefs:** At the very beginning of the novel, Hesse engages with the question of religion. Hesse does not accept the highly narrow understanding of religion as a kind of prescription from the sacred texts. He comes out as a vocal opponent of this understanding of religion.

Hesse further demonstrates how this ritualistic religion miserably fails to nurture one's soul and mind. *Siddhartha* practices the ritual meticulously, 'breaths from the verses of the Rig Veda', but his mind and soul are restless. *Siddhartha* is a reason for joy for others, but he himself is beset with restlessness. By leaving his house to follow another path to find enlightenment, he rebels against the religion which has been institutionalized with fixation on rules and regulations, which is more like an outward practice but brings no inward changes and thus achieves nothing. What further encouraged this protest against the religion is that it contradicted his instinct of finding the Atman, the self, which he, by instinct, knew was the only way for the union with the Brahman. The existence of God appeared to him to be a flawed notion that made the rituals redundant.

**Distinguishing Knowledge from Wisdom:** One of the main themes in *Siddhartha* is acquiring wisdom. *Siddhartha* distinguishes knowledge from wisdom and says that wisdom cannot be communicated in the form of words. In the form of words, we merely gain the knowledge of something, but wisdom comes with the courage to internalize that knowledge. Wisdom can be obtained only through self-experience. That is why *Siddhartha* stayed neither with Samanas, who were living a life of strict discipline to attain enlightenment, nor with Gotama, who had attained enlightenment. He agreed with the teachings of Gotama, but contested that they fail to teach the path to reach the Self. It was his understanding that the teachings of Gotama could inform one on how to lead a righteous life, shunning from the evils but they do not reveal the experiences that Gotama had in the moment of enlightenment, which is the only source of wisdom. That is why, after listening to Gotama, expressing his reverence for his teachings, he respectfully carries on his journey, unlike his friend Govinda, who also had earlier parted ways with Samanas, but could not resist the desire to become a follower of Gotama.

Commenting on the Vedas and Upanishads, *Siddhartha* calls them magical and pure but finds them unfortunately ineffective for the seekers of the essence of life. This point is elaborated in *Siddhartha*'s comparison with the

Brahmans, who are experts in the holy scriptures, but do not implement those teachings in their life and commit the same sin again and again, which Siddhartha finds highly paradoxical. They have mastered the written words but are still far away from the wisdom.

**The Sutra of Happiness is found within:** Siddhartha was blessed with everything that one could dream of in a material world to be happy. Yet he lacked peace of mind. He always doubted whether material affluence or his physical attractiveness could bring him any happiness, whether the love showered on him by his parents and friends could give him any bliss. His hope for a lasting sense of happiness was always shrouded with suspicion, and in his heart raged discontent. The realization that such external factors can never bring him the eternal happiness has already dawned upon him.

Later on, Siddhartha gets into a relationship with Kamala, a beautiful courtesan. The dreamlike intoxication turns into lived experience with Kamala, as he becomes immersed in sensual awakening. Siddhartha learns the art of making money, becomes a successful trader, and lavishes in his earnings. But soon all this also appears to him like a dream. The futility of the material world gets reflected in the words of the ferryman Vasudeva, who helps Siddhartha cross the river and reach the village where Siddhartha would meet Kamala and Kamaswamy, when he says to Siddhartha 'You too, Samana, will come back' (Hesse, 2021:57). Siddhartha at the end leaves Kamala, squanders in gambling all the money he had earned, and carries on in his journey of finding Nirvana.

**Atman:** Hesse lays a greater emphasis on the awareness of the self, which is also called Atman. Right at the beginning of the novel, Siddhartha, who is learning in the company of wise men, practices meditation and chants as taught to him by his teachers, has learnt the Brahmanical practices with dexterity and is believed to become a great Brahmin, is also aware of the existence of Atman.

With the constant unrest in his heart despite chanting of Mantras, the sacrifices, the meditation, he grew aware of the fact that Atman was the only one to be worshipped, which resides within the Self, and did not need any ornamental practice. For Siddhartha, Atman is the only thing worth knowing. Thus, for him, the search for the Atman becomes paramount. And since all other knowledge that was being imparted does not lead to Atman, Siddhartha finds them to be hollow. For him, gods were just another creation like any other human being and were subject to the law of mortality like any other human being. It is only Atman that is indestructible; the essence of human life, which does not change or get corrupted, and only after knowing the Atman, one could attain Nirvana. The bliss that one feels after realizing the Atman cannot be expressed in words.

**The Dynamism of Knowledge:** The wanderings of Siddhartha discover another truth about the nature of knowledge. Siddhartha finds that knowledge is very dynamic, and not static or absolute. It has no fixed source. His heart remained restless in the company of the Brahmins who knew Vedas and Upanishads, could perform the rituals with perfection and could recite the Mantras with precision. Even in the company of Gotama, whom he considered the only venerable one, could not still his thirst for knowledge, and he charts a different path than that of Gotama. On this path, he learns from a trader, from a boatman, and even from a beautiful courtesan. Thus, he emphasizes that one needs to remove the blinkers and have an open and free mindset in the pursuit of knowledge.

**Diverse Approaches to Understanding the Essence of Life:** Hesse's Siddhartha is a firm believer that there is no one defined way of understanding the essence of life. Everyone has to find his or her own path. Siddhartha has closely followed the path of Dharma, of religious rituals, of worshipping, and making offerings to the gods, but his instinct told him that this is not the way for him. He then follows the path of the Samanas, undergoes spiritual practices of self-discipline and self-regulation, dictated by rules to purify his mind and soul, and learns to survive with the bare minimum of food. To find tranquility, he became dead to himself, but the satisfaction, the eternal peace, still eluded him. He then traverses the path of Kama and Artha, and in the course of time realizes their vanity. He attains Moksha only after having personal experience of all the paths. His experience of enlightenment consisted of the learnings that he acquired on each of these paths. Opening his heart to Govinda, he

says that he does not consider any one person as his teacher. He learnt from the Brahmins, from the Samana, from Gotama, from the courtesan Kamala, from the trader Kamaswamy, from the ferryman Vasudeva, and also from the river. Thus, the essence of life is a composite of experiences that one makes with a conscious and open mind, irrespective of the chosen paths.

**Conclusion:** In *Siddhartha*, Hesse lays forward a message very clearly and that is, the goal of salvation cannot be achieved by a forceful rejection of things. Siddhartha follows the path of pleasure and to be able to fulfil his desire of pleasure he accumulates material resources. But he later on realizes their vapidity. Thus it conveys the message that pleasure also has value, it is a part of life; one just needs to keep in mind that it is not the entire life. Siddhartha could become aware of the futility of the material world, only because he was constantly listening to his inner voice. At the guidance of his inner voice he dived into the Samsara, in the whirlpool of desire, emotional bondages and indulgences. Only with the guidance of his inner voice he could see the Samsara as physical manifestation of Maya, could awake spiritually and could attain Nirvana. Siddhartha is not in favor of outright rejection of pleasure or indulgences; it encourages one to exercise mindfulness or awareness about the present to attain bliss.

One can read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* as his personal interpretation of Buddhism, an artistic exploration of one's journey in the pursuit of enlightenment. What one discovers in this circuitous journey is a beautiful synthesis of Buddhism and the philosophic ideas from the principal work of Hindu Philosophy *Bhagavad Gita*. It can be concluded that the philosophic ideas in *Siddhartha* are not just a mere prescription but a detailed description of the journey to the Nirvana with all its obstacles.

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