

# Siddhartha

## Still Works

by Robert Mossman

Judaism is to Christianity as Hinduism is to Buddhism. To my SAT-satiated high school seniors, this is the way I explain the origins of these four central religions. Though it is a simplistic analogy and perhaps a disservice to the complexity of the religions, it works. But while it is easy to see the connections between Judaism and Christianity as they are reflected in the Bible, it is not always easy to understand how Buddhism arose out of Hinduism, particularly because the textual basis is more obscure.

One modern text, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, can work admirably to bridge this gap. Profoundly popular in the sixties as a portrait of another world that somehow seemed more real and pure, the book now is often considered passé. I have found that for my high school students of comparative religion, the truths, the searching, the wisdom so inherent in the themes and concerns of the novel are still relevant and persuasive. That it also illustrates truths and knowledge about Hinduism and Buddhism and has, at its heart, a Buddhist sensibility makes it an excellent choice for a transition text between these two great Eastern religions. In the year-long comparative religion course, it comes between our study of Hinduism and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and our study of Buddhism.

Siddhartha, the character, goes on a journey of self-discovery. Achieving self-awareness is one of the major obsessions of teenagers; thus, the innate appeal of Siddhartha as a character is readily apparent. But what makes the book so accessible for the class is its detail about the two religions from the Indian subcontinent.

Within the first two pages, several of the major concepts and practices of Hinduism are mentioned.

As a boy, Siddhartha is already proficient in their understanding and practice. "He knew how to pronounce Om silently . . . he knew how to recognize Atman within the depth of his being."<sup>1</sup> In fact, Siddhartha is something of a religious prodigy. His acquisition of such salient religious practices is notable; most Hindus take years of practice and discipline to obtain such success, if, indeed, it is ever mortally accomplished. His easy assumption of religion might seem facile, yet to students it suggests a serious purpose and the possibility that even though young, they, too, can accomplish the realization of religious ideas and practices. Furthermore, these first several pages demonstrate Siddhartha's concern with the Atman, a concept that is very difficult for my students to comprehend. It is Siddhartha's immersion in religion and exploring his soul that is, in fact, the Atman, that spiritual being within everyone; this is a concept not easily intelligible to my students.

Obviously, too, there is a conscious attempt to echo the life of the Buddha; indeed, many students assume Siddhartha is like his namesake, Siddhartha Gautama Śākyamuni, really the Buddha, until their famous meeting a few chapters later. And just like the Buddha, Siddhartha is unhappy. He has it all—he is on the verge of *moksha*, the ultimate goal of all Hindus, which means that he will be out of the samsaric cycle of reincarnated lives—yet he seems peculiarly unsatisfied and disconcerted. The parallels to my students are obvious. While many come from rather normal families, their personal sense of angst is real. The beauty of reading this novel is in the students' instinctive identification with this mysterious despair which Siddhartha is experiencing. It may seem distracted and diffuse, both to my

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students and to Siddhārtha, but that does not minimize its reality. Pedagogically, it is often more effective for students to identify intuitively with a protagonist without too much overt teacher invitation or intervention. Many students do identify with Siddhārtha quickly because they sense what he is experiencing, even if they cannot name it. A student once plaintively remarked to me, “Everyone says these are supposed to be the happiest days of our lives, but they sure aren’t for me.”

In illustrating the two traditions of these Asian religions, no section is more important than Siddhārtha’s meeting with the Buddha. After several years with the Samanas, Hindu ascetics, during which Siddhārtha undergoes extreme physical deprivation, he is still not satisfied. So he and his faithful friend Govinda go in search of the famous teacher of whom they have heard so much. The chapter “Gautama” is central in teaching Buddhism. In several places the “Illustrious One” enunciates the major components of what is now known as Buddhism. The descriptions of the Buddha in this chapter are especially illuminating. They present the Buddha as a man, a special man to be sure, but nonetheless a man who has struggled and found, just like most human beings. Students are quick to assume that the Buddha is some kind of deity, but the passages of description emphasize his humanity, his peacefulness, his reality.

Siddhārtha is impressed by the presence of the Buddha, but ultimately not by his teachings:

*... and so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teaching what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment. That is why I am going on my way—not to seek another and better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal alone—or die.<sup>2</sup>*

### TEENAGERS IDENTIFY WITH SIDDHĀRTHA’S JOURNEY INTO THE REAL WORLD AND QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Govinda is impressed and decides to stay with the Buddha, thus setting up a keen contrast between the two, which resonates throughout the novel.

Siddhārtha resolves, “I will learn from myself, be my own pupil; I will learn from myself the secret of Siddhārtha.”<sup>3</sup> While Siddhārtha never acknowledges this awakening directly, he is, in essence, taking a very Buddhist approach by finding himself through his own efforts. Seeking one’s own enlightenment, just like the Buddha had done in his momentous night under the Bodhi tree, is one of the central notions of Buddhism. For teenagers, this effort rings true. Siddhārtha is seeking his own enlightenment, and for many teenagers, this is exactly what they themselves would like to be doing.

Siddhārtha plunges into the maelstrom of real life. Religion, philosophy, and wisdom are forgotten. Siddhārtha, who never had the chance while young, now enters into what Hinduism identifies as “paths of desire,” and he does so with passion. He lusts in the presence of Kamala, the courtesan, he joins the realm of business to provide for Kamala’s desires, and he is completely “amongst the people” as the chapter title avers, living a life of hedonism.

“Slowly the soul sickness of the rich crept over him.”<sup>4</sup> Many of my students cringe at this description of Siddhārtha. Many of them are, if only by happenstance of birth and upbringing, very much ensnared by this same disease. More effectively than any preacher or politician or moralistic teacher, Siddhārtha’s descent into desire compels them to ponder their own private lives and their consumptive nature.

All this, too, Siddhārtha eventually finds inadequate. He leaves both Kamala and his consuming life, which he has found to be a trap—as many of my students would like to. Siddhārtha’s journeys lead him to the river, the ferry, and the ferryman Vasudeva. Here, beside the enduring and powerful Hindu symbol of a river, he decides to stay, to wait for life to engulf him, to empower him by its inevitability. Such a decision has both Hindu and Buddhist instincts—Hindu, because it implies innate identification with the river, one of the key

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natural symbols in Hindu iconography, and Buddhist, because he is once again asserting his own control over his destiny, and, in a keen sense, awaiting further enlightenment.

Life does come to Siddhārtha, including the life which he has unknowingly engendered; namely, his own son. My students are usually somewhat disconcerted by this episode. This man who has so successfully mirrored so many of their own desires and hopes seems a failure as a parent. Students are often of two minds about parents: they want them to be helpful, compassionate, and tolerant, but when the parents are not so perfect in real life, as inevitably they will not be, the students become flustered and frustrated. Siddhārtha's lack of success with his own son, who seems such a spoiled brat to many of them, is too close to real life. Parenting is messy, but children do not want to acknowledge this.

The years pass, and finally Govinda, in his wanderings as a Buddhist monk, returns for a final encounter with Siddhārtha. High drama and eloquent discourse ensue. The contrast between the twin roles of committed religionist and dispassionate observer is dramatic and evocative.

Govinda said . . . *Have you not discovered certain knowledge yourself that has helped you to live? It would give me great pleasure if you would tell me something about this?*

Siddhārtha said . . . *Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish. . . . Knowledge can be communicated but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.*<sup>5</sup>

To ask a student after twelve years of schooling if he or she has gained any wisdom is revealing. Most will answer that they have not. They will acknowledge gaining knowledge, the kind of knowledge that may help with the SAT or final exams, but wisdom remains elusive. Many students confronted by this reality react with discouragement. They feel they have been cheated and are astonished that all their schooling has delivered so little. A few, the discerning ones, may argue this is precisely the point of religions, to offer wisdom. Most will feel like sitting by a river.

Inevitably, in spring parent/teacher conferences, I am asked about my teaching of *Siddhartha*. A few parents think it is quaint, some remember reading it and being moved, some simply shudder at this sixties relic. My stock answer to all is to ask their children. Seldom do I hear of such discussions, but one mother once reported, referring to her daughter, "She said it was the best book she had ever read and that it made her understand life." Beyond the obvious lessons about the nature of Hinduism and Buddhism, *Siddhartha* can assist students as an early step on a journey toward wisdom. Such a book still deserves to be taught. ■

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**NOTES**

- 1 Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. New York: Bantam, 1971, 3-4.
2. *ibid.*, 34.
3. *ibid.*, 39.
4. *ibid.*, 78.
5. *ibid.*, 142.

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# Teaching Indian Buddhism with Siddhartha — or Not?

by Catherine Benton

In teaching the perspectives of the Asian religious traditions, I am involved daily in the process of observing, interpreting, and explaining the thinking of one culture to people whose minds have been molded by the world view of quite a different culture. In structuring this process, one of the most important tasks is choosing texts that work to form bridges between a primarily (broadly speaking) American way of seeing, and either an Indian, Japanese, or Chinese perspective. To this end, I am always looking for writing that will create links sufficiently clear to allow American readers to grasp new paradigms while scrupulously maintaining the integrity of the Asian conceptions.

In more than twelve years of this continual search, however, I have sometimes discovered writing which, under the guise of presenting an Asian perspective, presents instead something more congruent with the author's own cultural and perhaps religious values. Such writings appear to create bridges and links, but they, in fact, superimpose their own culturally defined world views onto that of a particular Asian tradition. Most often, a uniquely Indian or Chinese perspective is subtly refashioned into a variant of a Judeo-Christian model, sounding quite plausible and even intriguing but no longer Indian or Chinese. In addition, precisely because these newly fashioned "Asian" perspectives have such a "familiar ring" to them, an American audience finds these presentations "clear" and "easy to grasp"; they have seduced both author and reader into thinking that real insight into Buddhist or Hindu perception has been achieved.

Although the popularity of these works as transmitters of Asian thought among a general reading public is disturbing, my primary concern is rather their use in college or high-school introductory Asian religion or world religion classes because they contain enough of the terminology and images of the Asian tradition to be compelling, but they lack a solid grounding in the tradition as a whole.

One such text is Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, sometimes used to introduce students to Indian Buddhist thought. I emphasize that *Siddhartha* is problematic only when used as a reflection of Indian Buddhism, not when presented as a narrative reflecting Hesse's internal struggle to understand his own life as a spiritual process. Problems arise when *Siddhartha* is taken out of its European, and more specifically German Protestant Christian, context, and used to present Indian Buddhist thought, because many of the fundamental perspectives of the Buddhist tradition are obscured, if not turned completely upside-down.

Once the *Siddhartha*-model is fixed in the minds of intellectually curious and enthusiastic students, reading and understanding primary Buddhist texts or more authentic interpretations and commentaries become more difficult, as contradictory models are described in these texts. Studying patterns of thinking and perceptions of a culture different from one's own should feel at the very least unfamiliar, if not unsettling, but Hesse's presentation of Indian ways of thinking flows easily into our own cultural frameworks—influenced, as American intellectual thinking is, by European literary and philosophical ideas. After Hesse's "Indian Buddhist" world view has been made so comfortable in *Siddhartha*, reading Asvaghosa or Nāgārjuna or Vimalakīrti and reconciling their views with those of Hesse's *Siddhartha* becomes much harder work. For young American students of Buddhism, the world-loving ways of Hesse's *Siddhartha* are much easier to relate to than the highly disciplined ways of Siddhārtha Gautama, the fifth century B.C.E. Indian ascetic.

Treating Hesse's *Siddhartha* as a paradigmatic Buddhist figure not only misrepresents the nature of Buddhist practice, but subsequently makes it more difficult to grasp the genuine differences in cultural perspectives that exist between the students' own Euro-American monotheistic world view and that of an Indian Buddhist culture. When we accept Hesse's *Siddhartha* as a bonafide exam-

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ple of Indian Buddhist thinking and practice, we camouflage the world view and accompanying natural biases of the author's cultural framework, as well as the framework brought to the reading by American students.

**HESSE, SIDDHARTHA, AND THE BUDDHA:  
DISTINGUISHING ONE FROM THE OTHER**

Hesse's grandfather was a missionary in India for thirty years, and Hesse wrote that he was greatly influenced from a young age by his grandfather's stories. As a result of this childhood fascination, Hesse travelled to India and other Asian countries in 1911 and ultimately wrote several books based on these experiences.<sup>1</sup> The novel *Siddhartha* was finally published in 1922 after almost four years of writing and rewriting.

From Hesse's diaries, we get a glimpse of the impressions of India which Hesse brought back with him to Germany and which helped shape his thoughts for *Siddhartha*.

*We come to the South and East full of longing, driven by a dark and grateful premonition of home, and we find here a paradise, the abundance and rich voluptuousness of all natural gifts. We find the pure, simple, childlike people of paradise. But we ourselves are different; we are alien here and without any rights of citizenship; we lost our paradise long ago, and the new one that we wish to build is not to be found along the equator and on the warm seas of the East. It lies within us and in our own northern future.*<sup>2</sup>

Upon reading Hesse's reflections, the editor of the *Hesse Companion*, Anna Otten, remarks that "it is no surprise that Hesse undertook to write a novel about India; [but] by the same token, it would be naive to read the book as an embodiment or exegesis of Indian philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Yet readers less informed than Otten often fail to recognize that Hesse wrote primarily about his own inner struggles, and that he used his acquaintance with Indian thought only as the framework for this internal exploration.

Hesse's embarrassingly quaint homogenization of Asian Indians as "pure, simple, childlike people of paradise" is matched by a comparably

superficial understanding of the Buddhist tradition. Otten quotes a passage from Hesse's diary written in 1920 documenting his feelings about Buddhism.

*My preoccupation with India, which has been going on for almost twenty years and has passed through many stages, now seems to me to have reached a new point of development. . . . now Buddhism appears to me more and more as a kind of very pure, highly bred reformation—a purification and spiritualization that has no flaw but its great zealousness, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no replacement.*<sup>4</sup>

Through *Siddhartha*, Hesse expresses this skeptical view that Buddhism destroys old beliefs without offering substantive replacements; that Buddhism fails to provide effective guidance in the search for inner peace and meaning. In the novel, *Siddhartha* speaks these words to the Buddha himself:

*You have learned nothing through teachings, and so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment. . . . That is why I am going on my own way—not to seek another and better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal alone—or die.*<sup>5</sup>

As the Buddha walks away, *Siddhārtha* reflects:

*I, also, would like to look and smile, sit and walk like that, so free, so worthy, so restrained, so candid, so childlike and mysterious. A man only looks and walks like that when he has conquered his Self. I also will conquer my Self (29).*

*Siddhārtha* continues this reflection, wondering to himself:

*What is it that you wanted to learn from teachings and teachers, and although they taught you much, what was it they could not teach you? And he thought: It*

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was the Self, the character and nature of which I wished to learn. I wanted to rid myself of the Self, to conquer it, but I could not conquer it, I could only deceive it, could only fly from it, could only hide from it. . . . The reason why I do not know anything about myself, the reason why Siddhartha has remained alien and unknown to myself is due to one thing, to one single thing—I was afraid of myself, I was fleeing from myself. I was seeking Brahman, Atman, I wished to destroy myself, to get away from myself, in order to find in the unknown innermost, the nucleus of all things, Atman, Life, the Divine, the Absolute. But by doing so, I lost myself on the way. . . . I will no longer study Yoga-Veda [sic], Atharva-Veda, or asceticism, or any other teachings. I will learn from myself, be my own pupil; I will learn from myself the secret of Siddhartha (31–32)

As Hesse’s protagonist sets out to find “the Self” by himself, the concepts that are drawn from the Indian religious traditions begin to get muddy. Is Hesse talking about the Self of *The Upanishads*, the Atman, or is Hesse talking about the philosophical and emotional search that Americans and Europeans often feel caught up in, the existential search “to find oneself”? If Hesse is referring here to the Atman of *The Upanishads*, we must remind ourselves that the Buddha, after his enlightenment, taught most categorically that there is no Atman, no Self (known as the Buddhist doctrine of *anātma*). Making a critical break from the Hindu tradition, the Buddha taught that there is no Self to be found.

Yet Hesse’s Siddhārtha, adopting what he perceived to be the same goal as the Buddha, offers us an alternate way to this same end, but by a way *not* bound by the discipline of the Buddhist precepts. In stark contrast to the way charted by the Buddha, the novel’s character lives a life deeply enmeshed in commercial enterprise and sensuality, though a life which nonetheless brings even deeper insight than that gained by his friend Govinda in his forty years as a Buddhist monk. Having rejected the way of the Buddha and following instead his own guidance, Siddhārtha appears at the end of the

novel deeply peaceful and content in his understanding of life. In a final scene, seeing a radiance in Siddhārtha that he has seen only in the Buddha, Govinda asks Siddhārtha to teach him so that he, too, can attain this peace.

“[I]t is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect.”

“I understand that,” said Govinda, “but that is just what the Illustrious One called illusion. He preached benevolence, forbearance, sympathy, patience—but not love. He forbade us to bind ourselves to earthly love.”

“. . . I will not deny that my words about love are in apparent contradiction to the teachings of Gotama [the Buddha]. That is just why I distrust words so much, for I know that this contradiction is an illusion. I know that I am at one with Gotama. . . . Not in speech or thought do I regard him as a great man, but in his deeds and life” (118–119).

Discounting as illusory any differences between his way and that of the Buddha, Hesse/Siddhārtha still dismisses any “greatness” in the words or thoughts of Śakyāmuni Buddha. Govinda is advised simply to respect the stature of Śakyāmuni Buddha as “a great man,” and to forget his teachings.

While there is a certain appeal to the notion that fundamentally, all differences among various religious traditions are insignificant or even illusory, a problem inevitably arises when we try to sort out the reasons for the “apparent differences.” Indeed, the Buddhist teachings of No Self, Impermanence, and Emptiness communicate a very different world view from that shaped by the Christian belief in One God and the permanence of the individual soul. Hesse’s approach is to pretend that no differences exist. As a historian of religion, however, I must examine the figure of Siddhārtha in the light of such fundamental Buddhist teachings as the doctrine of No Self and the practice of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—a practice understood by the tradition to encapsulate the fundamental guiding principles of the tradition.

Students have sometimes come to me after struggling through Asvaghosa’s *Buddhacarita*, a first-century Indian narrative that tells the life of the Buddha in a colorful and culturally-specific form, and asked whether it might not be more helpful simply to read Hesse’s *Siddhartha*.



If a practicing Buddhist were to read *Siddhartha*, he or she would most certainly wonder what had happened to the foundation of all Buddhist insight, the deep reverence for the three refuges and the essential practice of meditation.



From the perspective of these teachings, Hesse's *Siddhārtha* does not embody the Buddhist ideal, rejecting as he does both the three refuges and the understanding of No Self which are of core significance for any Buddhist. While Hesse's protagonist reaches out for knowledge of his "Self," the Buddhist monk or nun strives to see the inherent emptiness of the "Self."

Students have sometimes come to me after struggling through Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, a first-century Indian narrative that tells the life of the Buddha in a colorful and culturally-specific form, and asked whether it might not be more helpful simply to read Hesse's *Siddhartha*. *Siddhartha*, they explain, is much clearer and provides an image of a spiritual seeker with whom they can relate more easily, and isn't he, as *Siddhārtha* himself says in the final pages of the book, also a Buddhist?

While Hesse appears to convey Indian concepts, he uses themes and motifs more common to western philosophical thinking, such as the individual's existential search for meaning, the youth rebelling against institutions and teachers, freedom as a paradigm for boundless potential, and perhaps most importantly, the image of the self-made person. *Siddhārtha*'s achievement of what he perceived to be deep religious meaning, deeper than that of the Buddhist monks, is gained by following models more expressive of European existentialist thought than of Indian Buddhist thinking. *Siddhārtha* specifically rejects established religious institutions and practices, as well as religious teachings and teachers. What an appealing model for the American ideals of independence and individualism! When American students compare the Sanskrit eccentricities of the first century Indian *Buddhacarita* with the flowing prose of a story which highlights patterns of thinking already valued by them, Asvaghosa doesn't stand a chance.

Ultimately, the packaging of Asian perspectives in American and European patterns and values undermines methods of teaching that respectfully but firmly acknowledge cultural and religious differences. I often find that American students have numerous preconceptions about Asian traditions that run the gamut from "brain-washing cults" to "founts of mystical powers." When these preconceptions are combined with reading works like *Siddhartha*, students have a dif-

ficult time accepting images of Buddhist practice described by Indian Buddhists themselves or by western scholars and practitioners immersed in the tradition. In reading these texts, students find themselves pushed to let go of images and concepts that they have found quite appealing. Particularly for those students who have taken earlier courses in which texts like *Siddhartha* were held up as authoritative and who feel confident in their grasp of Buddhist thinking, it becomes difficult to read primary text sources which describe a tradition very different from that portrayed in *Siddhārtha*. These students find their confidence replaced by confusion and a vague sense of betrayal.

### CONCLUSIONS

My purpose in writing this article has been to examine the assumptions and perspectives of a text which I have found questionable in terms of gaining insight into the Buddhist tradition. Students have found *Siddhartha* a fascinating and compelling work, and asked for my thoughts on its value as a reliable source for understanding Buddhism. Rereading *Siddhartha* with a mind trained in the study of, and respect for, primary texts, I found a very different story than I did as an undergraduate who had not yet had any experience of Buddhists or Buddhism. Having now studied the texts and the contributions of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and American Buddhists, I must argue against using Hesse's narrative as an introduction to the Buddhist tradition. Without arguing that the only authoritative sources are writers indigenous to a particular tradition, I do think that the teachers and writers who speak from within the traditions must be used as serious "touchstones" for evaluating other translations and interpretations of the traditions. The guidance of indigenous practitioners and scholars as a *whole*, not simply the work of one or two individuals, must be used as the "measuring stick" for determining the depth of understanding of the interpolations and elucidations of "outsiders."

Again, I do not want to say that all studies emanating from outside particular traditions must be viewed skeptically until given the imprimatur of an elite group of scholars within that religious tradition. But I do think that all authors exploring cultural and religious traditions outside their own must first *be aware of*, and second, *be sensitive*

to how the tradition explains itself to its own practitioners as well as to others. If a practicing Buddhist were to read *Siddhartha*, he or she would most certainly wonder what had happened to the foundation of all Buddhist insight, the deep reverence for the three refuges and the essential practice of meditation.

The challenge for all of us who are students of traditions rooted in cultures we were not born into is to chart a course that is academically truthful and sound, which at the same time allows us to “enter” that new culture with awareness, sensitivity, and respect. Entering with these sensibilities, our goal is to emerge from our study truly grounded in an understanding of the new culture, as well as with a deeper understanding of our own. ■

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#### NOTES

1. *Picture Book (Bilderbuch)* was published in 1926, and *Out of India (Aus Indien)* in 1913.
2. Otten, 73. She is quoting here from *Aus Indien* but comments that much of this text was also reprinted in *Bilderbuch*.
3. Otten, 74–75.
4. Otten, 74. Her quotation is from “Aus Einem Tagebuch des Jahres 1920,” *Corona*, 3 (1921), 201–202.
5. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*. New York: New Directions, 1951, 27–28.

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# Siddhartha

## — A Journey to the East?

by Mark MacWilliams

Over seventy-five years after its initial publication, Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* enjoys the status of a minor literary classic. Yet, despite its continuing popularity, or perhaps because of it, an important question for those of us teaching Asian religions is whether *Siddhartha* has any useful role to play in our classes.

Part of me inclines against using it in the typical religions of the East or introduction to Buddhism course. As Catherine Benton points out, Hesse was profoundly disappointed with what he saw of living Asian religions during his journey to the East in 1911. While the India of his own time remained an uninspiring enigma for him, Hesse constructed his own mysterious Orient out of his literary imagination. This imaginary India, which forms the timeless mytho-poetic world of *Siddhartha*, owes its genesis in part to Hesse’s study of the sacred books of the East—the Vedas, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the Theravāda Buddhist Suttas. Passages from *The Upanishads*, in particular, are quoted in the novel.

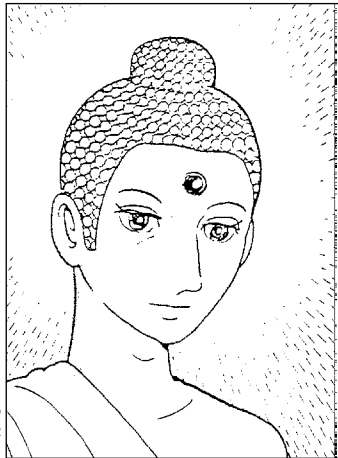
#### AN INDIAN POETIC WORK

How did he read these texts? He read them in much the same way as other German romantics of his day read them. The subtitle of *Siddhartha*, “Eine indische Dichtung,” an Indian poetic work, is highly suggestive in this regard. Hesse saw Indian spirituality in much the same way as the great orientalist Max Müller understood the hymns to the Vedic gods in the *Rig-Veda*. According to Müller, the religion of the Indians was originally based upon a sensuous poetic intuition of the infinite through nature. This pure nature mysticism was later corrupted by what Müller called “the disease of language,” the unfortunate tendency of the later tradition to create phantasmagoric forms of the gods with their own mythologies out of what were originally only the natural metaphors that the Vedic poets used to express their experience of the ineffable transcendent.

This imaginary India, which forms the timeless mytho-poetic world of *Siddhartha*, owes its genesis in part to Hesse’s study of the sacred books of the East—the Vedas, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the Theravāda Buddhist Suttas.







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Fig. 1. Siddhārtha in Osamu Tezuka's *Budda*.

Like Müller's Vedic poets, Hesse's *Siddhartha* also intuits the infinite through the sensuous forms of this world. Above all else, it is the river Siddhārtha crosses throughout the novel that discloses to him the eternal but everchanging spiritual reality from which all things flow. In the end, Siddhārtha identifies his true self (*ātman*) with this river of being when he decides to live his life as a ferryman attuned to the river's song.<sup>1</sup> Here, Hesse skillfully incorporates into his novel a powerful

Indian religious symbol. Hindu sacred sites are typically called *tīrtha*, "crossing places" or "fords," where one can traverse the flood of birth and death (*samsāra*) to unite with the sacred. It is important to note, however, that in Hesse's hands, the *tīrtha* is not the same as the Indian original. The typical *tīrtha*, with its many gods and rich iconographical and mythological traditions, is totally absent in Hesse's spiritual allegory. Thoroughly demythologized by Hesse's Protestant sensibilities in *Siddhartha*, it is portrayed as a desolate river bank with the ferryman's simple hut. It has been cleared of any specific associations with Krishna, Shiva, Devī, or any other of the popular Hindu divinities.<sup>2</sup>

If there is a vision of Hinduism and Buddhism in this work, then I would have to agree with Benton that it is one that serves the author's own introspective spiritual interests. Hesse is not concerned with interpreting Asian religions to a Western audience. Rather, he is wrestling with his own spiritual demons, often related to the dilemmas of his own Christian faith, especially the Swabian pietism of his Indian missionary parents. Hesse's critics have thoroughly explored this Christian-centered preoccupation of *Siddhartha*.<sup>3</sup>

But before we banish *Siddhartha* from the classroom, I would like to consider one more thing. I think that Robert Mossman is essentially correct when he points out that *Siddhartha*, as a journey of spiritual discovery, "still works" to engage students' interest in Asian religions. It does so, perhaps, for the wrong reasons, but that is not Hesse's fault. Hesse is very clear that he is not writing a story about the Buddha. The religious quest of his Siddhārtha, which means "one who has found the way," is juxtaposed in his novel with the story of

the Buddha, whose own meanderings briefly intersect his. While Siddhārtha's life is loosely patterned after the life of the Buddha, it is a different story. Anyone who conflates the two is making an elementary and entirely preventable critical mistake.

Hesse's *Siddhartha*, therefore, is a story about a story. If students are made aware of this, then one can design a class to compare and contrast Hesse's novel with the *Buddhacarita*, the *Jātaka* Tales, such as the story of Prince Vessantara, or stories from the Buddhist *avadāna* literature. As the historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith has said, "In comparison a magic dwells."<sup>4</sup> By comparing *Siddhartha* with other stories about the Buddha, could we not get students interested in different Asian ways of understanding the spiritual journey?

I like to compare Siddhārtha's spiritual journey with texts from the Japanese tradition. For example, I have students read the Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Bashō's travel sketches, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.<sup>5</sup> This is another story about the Buddha's story. At the outset, Bashō contrasts his own journey to Kashima shrine with his traveling companions, one of whom is a samurai, and the other, a Buddhist monk. David Barnhill has suggested that Bashō sees his own journey as a lifelong spiritual "wayfaring," instead of a Buddhist pilgrimage to a definitive sacred center out there, a difference that has all sorts of interesting religious implications.<sup>6</sup>

Another interesting book to compare with *Siddhartha* is the recently published Japanese *manga* version of the Buddha's life, *Budda*, by the comic book artist Osamu Tezuka.<sup>7</sup> This immense twelve-volume work of over two thousand pages has gone through twenty-two printings and sold over nine million copies in Japan. By looking at scenes from the *Budda*, students can see how a popular modern Japanese version of Siddhārtha's life differs from both the Sanskrit original and Hesse's own version (see figure 1).

One difference, for example, between Tezuka's Siddhārtha and Hesse's has to do with the *Budda*'s focus on social issues. While Hesse's *Siddhartha* always seeks his own highly personal encounter with God, a focus which perhaps reflects the author's Protestant faith, Tezuka's Siddhārtha works tirelessly for the social welfare of those he finds suffering around him, perhaps reflecting the northern Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*, or the being of



selfless compassion. Another difference has to do with the role of magic in the *Budda*. Feats of magic and spiritual healing have no role to play in *Siddhartha* since they would be relegated to the status of crass superstition by anyone from Hesse's background in German pietism. But Tezuka's Siddhārtha can perform all sorts of miracles. In particular, he is able to journey to other spiritual realms to bring back the souls of dying people. Tezuka's Siddhārtha would appeal to Japanese readers because it draws upon a shamanistic tradition of possession, exorcism, spiritual healing, and miracle-working Buddhist ascetics that has a rich history in Japanese folk religion.

A third book that is interesting to compare with *Siddhartha* is Oliver Statler's *Japanese Pilgrimage*.<sup>8</sup> Here one gets a story about a story that is based upon the life of the Buddha. As a western scholar, Statler writes about his own travels along the eighty-eight Shikoku temple route, a pilgrimage devoted to the veneration of the Japanese Buddhist saint Kōbō Daishi. Kōbō Daishi is believed to have realized enlightenment and attained Buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*). Pilgrims follow his footsteps in a circular course that makes a circuit around the island of Shikoku. Here students can reflect on many issues related to the Buddhist spiritual journey. While the premodern pilgrimage took many months and was understood as a form of ascetical discipline, today's pilgrims prefer to do the route on air conditioned luxury buses. Does a spiritual journey have to be ascetical to have a spiritually transformative effect? That is the assumption behind Hesse's *Siddhartha*, which shows Hesse's debt to the classic Christian penitential allegory of John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, instead of Chaucer's more ludic *Canterbury Tales*. The comparison between the two texts also raises the issue of cross-cultural interpretations of the other. Does Statler succeed in understanding Buddhism in the Japanese context? Or can he be accused of being a modern romantic who superimposes his own idealized image of "the mystical orient" upon the pilgrims of Shikoku just as Hesse does in the case of India?

*Siddhartha* can be useful in the classroom, provided that we have our students carefully examine the ways that it and other stories about the Buddha's life offer vastly different interpretations of the spiritual journey. ■

#### NOTES

1. The climax of the book is an epiphany that occurs when Siddhārtha's friend Govinda looks into his face and sees it as a mask that dissolves into a river of faces and living forms. See Hermann Hesse. *Siddhartha*. New York: Bantam, 1951, 150. This owes much to the description of Arjuna's mystical vision of Krishna-Vishnu's absolute form in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It also comes from a powerful dream of his father that Hesse had while in Singapore. See Ralph Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim in Crisis—A Biography*. New York: Pantheon, 1978, 152.
2. Two interesting books that highlight the role of icons, myths of the gods, and sacred geography in Indian pilgrimage are Diana L. Eck, *Darshan Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1985 and David L. Haberman, *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
3. G. W. Field sees *Siddhartha* as an essentially Protestant allegory about the highly personal struggle to attain a true sense of Christian love or *caritas* and freedom from sin through divine grace. See his *Hermann Hesse*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970, 81. Another critic sees the book as Hesse's attempt to reconcile the contradictions of his own Swabian pietism with its call for rigid ascetic discipline and fear of corporeal sin, on the one hand, and its reliance on feeling and sentiment (over ritual and intellect) to experience the intimacy of God, on the other. This struggle lies at the center of Hesse's novels, especially his *Narziss und Goldmund* (1930) which takes place in medieval Christian Europe rather than on the shores of the Ganges. See Freedman, *Pilgrim in Crisis*, 15–16.
4. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 19.
5. Nobuyuki Yuasa, trans., *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. London: Penguin Books, 1987.
6. David Barnhill, "Bashō as Bat: Wayfaring and Antistructure in the Journals of Matsuo Bashō," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (May, 1990):274–290.
7. Osamu Tezuka, *Budda*, 12 Vols. Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 1992–1993.
8. Oliver Statler, *Japanese Pilgrimage*. New York: William Marrow, 1983. For the most current study of the Shikoku pilgrimage, see Ian Reader, "Pilgrimage as Cult: The Shikoku Pilgrimage as a Window on Japanese Religion," in *Religion in Japan: Arrows to Heaven and Earth*, ed. by P. F. Kornicki and I. J. McMullen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 267–86.

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## Going Beyond Hesse's *Siddhartha*

by Joe Gawrys

For years I used Hesse's *Siddhartha* in my 11th-grade world religions course; now I don't. Here's why.

*Siddhartha* fulfills most teachers' desires for a text (and no book fulfills them all). It's an engaging read that's accessible to even the weaker students and yet is thoughtful enough for even the best. Students do, as Mossman says, often get very enthusiastic about it, and just about anything that fosters a love of reading and encourages thoughtfulness is worth assigning. *Siddhartha* also brings to life many of the Hindu terms we talk about in class, such as Brahmin and Om, and gives a powerful portrait of the Buddha. Without a doubt, a good novel like *Siddhartha* can do much to flesh out dry historical and philosophical material.

The problem is, though, as Benton points out, that Hesse was German, and not Hindu or Buddhist, and though he knows something about India and Hinduism and Buddhism, he's not primarily interested in (or probably even capable of) portraying them accurately—and sometimes he doesn't. So when I taught *Siddhartha* I adopted an approach opposite from Mossman's: rather than introduce Buddhism with *Siddhartha*, we read the novel after our study of Indian Buddhism. We then based much of class discussion around the very issues we're discussing here in *Education About Asia*—to what extent does Hesse accurately portray Hinduism and Buddhism, and to what extent is the philosophy of the novel itself Buddhist?

The students eventually come up with some of the same points that Benton and others have made: The novel is very confused in its use of the word Atman; in its treatment of Govinda, the novel doesn't seem to understand the independence the Buddha insisted on in his disciples (i.e., in the Anguttara Nikaya); Hesse romanticizes life in India, etc. This exercise is useful in many ways. The students get to read a good book, and they learn, if sometimes only by contrast, a bit more about Hinduism and Buddhism.

... I especially recommend Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg as two writers who are accessible to students and yet, unlike popularizers like Hesse or Alan Watts, are themselves deeply grounded in the Theravada tradition.



The last year I taught *Siddhartha*, though, after a discussion of the many aspects of the novel that aren't really Buddhist, one of my best students said, "Well, if we're studying Buddhism, why don't we read something that really is Buddhist?" Good question.

It's not that *Siddhartha* doesn't have its virtues; it clearly does. Nor do I think that in the hands of a sensitive teacher like Mossman, reading Hesse's novel is going to warp students' minds. In my world religions class (like others, I suspect), though, there are only about twelve class days for Indian Buddhism. Why not use these days for texts that clearly are Buddhist or accurate in their portrayal of Buddhism?

Lately, interest in Buddhism in the West has proliferated and matured, and there are now numerous excellent translations of early Buddhist materials such as *The Dhammapada*, *The Sutra on Lovingkindness*, and "The Fire Sermon". There are now also numerous Westerners who do understand Buddhism and are themselves Buddhist: I especially recommend Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg as two writers who are accessible to students and yet, unlike popularizers like Hesse or Alan Watts, are themselves deeply grounded in the Theravada tradition.

We're luckier than teachers of Asian studies were twenty or thirty years ago. Books like *Siddhartha* can, in the hands of sensitive teachers, be helpful; today, though, we just have more accurate materials available. ■

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