

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.

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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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