

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.

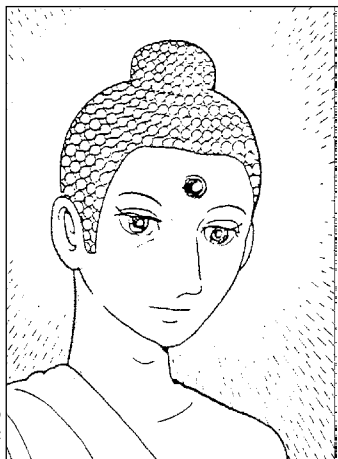
Part of me inclines against using it in the typical religions of the East or introduction to Buddhism course. As Catherine Benton points out, Hesse was profoundly disappointed with what he saw of living Asian religions during his journey to the East in 1911. While the India of his own time remained an 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.¹ 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.²

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*.³

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."⁴ 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*.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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*.⁸ 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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