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.

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Siddhārtha, 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 Siddhārtha 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, Siddhārtha 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."[1] In fact, Siddhārtha 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 Siddhārtha's concern with the Atman, a concept that is very difficult for my students to comprehend. It is Siddhārtha'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 Siddhārtha is like his namesake, Siddhārtha Gautama Śākyamuni, really the Buddha, until their famous meeting a few chapters later. And just like the Buddha, Siddhārtha 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 Siddhārtha is experiencing. It may seem distracted and diffuse, both to my

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.*[2]

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."[3] 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."[4] 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.*[5]

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.