

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.¹ 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.*²

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."³ 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.

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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 zealotness, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no replacement.*⁴

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.*⁵

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 Śakyāmunī Buddha. Govinda is advised simply to respect the stature of Śakyāmunī 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.

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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."

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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.

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