The German-Swiss writer Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) started the novel Siddhartha at the end of 1919, when his psychoanalytical novel Demian, (1919) was published, but after a few chapters he suspended his work on the novel for more than 20 months, finishing it only three years later, in summer 1922. In a letter written on August 19, 1922, to the French novelist Romain Rolland, an international champion of the pacifist ideology at the time, Hesse announced the completion of Siddhartha and its prospective printing scheduled for late autumn that same year. The work was translated into English in 1951 under the same title. The 20-month suspension of the work is still intriguing, since it represents, perhaps, the main key for understanding the message and the symbolism of the text.

As Hesse himself would claim, Siddhartha had been conceived as an "Indian poem," which means that the plot and the symbols of the text do not follow closely the classical myth of the Gautama Buddha complex. The novel is merely a meditation on how to achieve serenity by contemplation, not a textbook on spiritual exercise and practice. Hesse's Buddha goes beyond asceticism and technique to assert that serenity can be obtained by love and simplicity. Apart from the classical prototype, who steps back from the contemplation of Nirvana to preach among the humans the true path of salvation, Hesse's hero opens toward the realities of everyday life by taking up the cosmic rhythms that lie within the humble things of the universe: the trees, the rivers, nature itself.

The novel can be interpreted as a serene hymn to nature, acknowledged as the gentlest counterpart of humans. The novel Demian, Hesse's previous literary success, presented the protagonist's self-fulfillment in a typical social environment, although the energetic message of the text, taken from the late 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's teachings, suggested that the chosen few must "go beyond" morality and restriction, in order to enter the exclusive fraternity of those who are powerful. But after publishing Demian, Hesse's interest in people faded and shifted toward nature. Siddhartha expresses this shift, although another prose work acknowledges the transition: Klingsor's Last Summer, published by Hesse in 1920.

Hesse's acute desocialization is also shown by his decision to settle in Montagnola, a relatively small town in the Swiss Alps, not far from Lugano, to live the life of a hermit. In the letter to Rolland, Hesse also confessed that in spite of being less than an hour away, he had not visited Lugano for more than a year. The protagonist of Klingsor's Last Summer, a painter (like Hesse himself), lives alone in a distant medieval landscape, dotted by mysterious ruins and primeval woods. Like many of Hesse's heroes, Klingsor is a charming wanderer, self-sufficient in his isolation, where he occasionally indulges in Oriental poetry, good wine, and the random visits of a few friends. One of the teachers from The Glass Bead Game is also a Chinese hermit, living outside civilization in a tiny bamboo forest that he planted. Hesse's passion for gardens, flowers, and trees is well known, as is his conviction that nature is enough for a complete life. Siddhartha's contemplation expresses a pacifist ideology that can also be perceived as a revolt against the new political order brought about by the end of World War I.

Similarly, Siddhartha marks a revolt against traditional European values, which brings Hesse close to his literary and philosophical masters, Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The preference given to Oriental religion and its symbols shows his reluctance to take up Christianity as a privileged technique of salvation. Moreover, if we remember Hesse's Pietist family milieu, full of close relatives who went to India to preach, the option for Buddhism represented to Hesse an
equivalent to generational insurgence. Accordingly, the young Brahmin Siddhartha, the wise protagonist of the novel, rises against his father and his teachings, and becomes a humble boatman on the banks of a huge river, which is the central symbol of the protagonist’s personal adventure.

The revolt against the father figure (which can also be Gautama Buddha and his classical teaching) represents a main starting topic of *Siddhartha*. Hesse’s Indian “poem” is based on the paradoxical spiritual evolution of a young Buddhist Brahmin. Siddhartha is, to a certain extent, an anti-Buddha, because Hesse’s protagonist reverses the classical story of the historical Gautama Buddha, who lived in the sixth century B.C. According to the standard Indian legend, the founding master of Buddhism was given the name Siddhartha at birth (Gautama was his family name), and became Buddha Shakyamuni (“the sage of the Shakya clan”) through a spiritual rebirth after several years of asceticism and contemplation. He reached perfection through severe fasting and contemplation and attained complete spiritual insight, which yielded the sense of the pure concentration of the self and the possibility of transcendence toward the heavenly beauty of Nirvana.

Another legend maintains that while engaged in extreme fasting and surrounded by his disciples, Buddha discovered the uselessness of extreme mortification and decided to “come back” into the world of humans to preach the doctrine of salvation. Although five of his disciples abandoned him because of their disappointment with their master’s having ceased his contemplation, Buddha set out as a missionary on his way to challenge the archaic Hindu wisdom. He initiated a growing community of monks and followers, who gathered around him and his favorite new disciple, Ananda.

The classical Indian legend distinguishes between two successive phases in Buddha’s career, since an initial process of extreme asceticism, spiritual concentration, and solitude is followed by a decisive option taken toward human altruism, teaching, and generosity. In the first stage, Buddha reaches personal perfection, which allows him to control and surpass the endless chain of reincarnations. This implies going beyond our world and acting outside the ever-rotating wheel of time. In the second stage he decides to become a teacher and a preacher, a radical repositioning of his own self inside time and human suffering. By doing this Buddha acknowledges the existence of history and helps people find their way out of the traps and vicissitudes of everyday existence.

Hesse’s unorthodox plot starts with the revolt of the young Siddhartha against his condition as a Brahmin. He feels that the doctrine of sacrifice, which he learns as a very promising future Brahmin, cannot help self-exploration, since it leaves aside the very sense of asceticism, which is inner peace and self-understanding. To explore his soul Siddhartha leaves his father’s house and joins the tribe of the wandering ascetics called *samanas*, who live in the forest and engage in relentless techniques of reclusion and concentration. Followed by his friend Govinda, and meeting eventually the great Gautama Buddha, who teaches in a nearby region, Siddhartha achieves a highly spiritual detachment but also experiences the paradoxical revelation that, by yielding to extreme asceticism and mortification, he risks ending up in self-alienation, given the gap that may widen between him and the surrounding world.

To compensate for his estrangement, Siddhartha leaves the *samanas* and takes a step toward the sensual beauties of everyday life. By doing this he redisCOVERS many details of life he has ignored so far: the vivid colors of nature, people’s faces and their smell, the unpredictable metamorphoses of material beings, and, of course, love. Lured by a beautiful woman, he feels sensual rejuvenation in spite of his years of mortification. Reaching a town, he meets an attractive courtesan, Kamala, who initiates him into sexuality. To please her with precious gifts, he becomes a successful merchant under the guidance of an older tradesman, Kamaswami, but he practices his trade with detachment and joy, more as an art than as a way of living. In spite of his material success as a merchant, he decides to leave Kamala and Kamaswami, seeking to join his old friend Vasudeva on the banks of a river and become a humble ferryman.
The characters and situations of the novel are structured according to well-defined old Buddhist realities and symbols. Kamala, the courtesan, symbolizes the earthly world as illusion and Samsara, the endless flow of births and reincarnations. According to the Hindu teaching, due to the cumulative effect of one's actions in former lives (called *karma*), the soul is condemned to be reborn again and again, remaining captive in an endless chain of reincarnations. The Buddhist teaching also says that through penance, asceticism, and contemplation, a perfect soul can escape the cycle of reincarnations, reaching the pure realm of Nirvana. By leaving the *samanas*, Siddhartha voluntarily decides to continue his life within Samsara: His and Kamala's captivity in the world of illusions is represented by a bird in a cage, released by the courtesan when Siddhartha abandons his career as a merchant and goes down to the great river.

On the other hand, Govinda, Siddhartha's disciple, stays close to Nirvana, refusing to join his master when the latter decides to leave the ascetic life of the *samanas*. Siddhartha reveals to him that his decision to take up the earthly world is based on an unorthodox interpretation of the classical Buddhist doctrine, that is, on a solitary revolt against the very meaning of the master's teaching. He explains to Govinda that to achieve perfection, Buddha separates Nirvana and Samsara, although the universe as we see it does not show any sign of separation. On the contrary, it is a vivid integrity, an organic whole in which Nirvana and Samsara do not oppose each other but coexist in mutual completion. If a philosopher desires to become a sage, he must get to know both sides of the universe, not only Nirvana, since self-understanding also entails the harmonious integration of both halves of one's soul, not the privileging of one half against the other.

The river is the main symbol of completeness in the novel. Siddhartha and Vasudeva venerate it as a cosmic teacher, who binds the two sides of the universe together and links earth to eternity. The great river marks the center of the imaginary geography in Hesse's novel. Siddhartha crosses it several times. At first, when he is still a wandering ascetic (*samana*), he learns from the river that everything passes away in an endless flow that links life to death in the cosmic cycle of reincarnations. Later on, when he returns to the river as a ferryman, he experiences the revelation that the river has simultaneously contained, since time immemorial, all the nurturing energies and "images" of the world.

**Further Information**


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