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Transcending Illusions: Siddhartha's Path to Self-Realization through Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract:

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* explores the fundamental human pursuit of meaning, enlightenment, and self-realization. Set within the historical context of ancient India, the story chronicles Siddhartha's spiritual quest for ultimate truth and enlightenment. Although the title may imply a link to Buddhist philosophy, the novel deviates from traditional teachings by depicting the protagonist's achievement of enlightenment through independent self-reflection. This study meticulously analyses *Siddhartha*, drawing parallels between its themes and the concepts of self-realization as elucidated by Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta. Central to Shankaracharya's philosophy is non-duality, which emphasizes the intrinsic oneness of the individual self (*Atman*) and universal awareness (*Brahman*). Viewed from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta, this study brings Siddhartha's spiritual development to the fore, focusing on the existential challenges, moments of realization, and transformative events he faces during his journey. The present study reveals the profound importance of self-exploration and realization, as shown in *Siddhartha*, by examining how Hesse's story intersects with Shankaracharya's philosophical framework.

Keywords: self-exploration, realization, Buddhist philosophy, enlightenment, self-reflection.

Introduction

Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* profoundly connects with readers of all ages, delving into the fundamental search for purpose, enlightenment, and self-actualization that defines the human experience (Misra 111). The story takes place in ancient India and focuses

on the spiritual quest of its main character, Siddhartha, as he strives to uncover the ultimate truth and achieve liberation. His journey is primarily focused on his unwavering quest for self-realization, a notion firmly ingrained in the intellectual heritage of India (Brown 191). Hesse's fascination with India started in 1877 and persisted until 1904, when he relocated to Gaienhofen, Germany. His family members, including his grandfather, mother, and father, resided in India as missionaries. They were fluent in many languages and were interested in Indian philosophies (Baumann 1). While describing India's influence on Hesse, Baumann writes, "Hesse's confrontation with Indian culture was unreflected and preconscious (Baumann 1). Hesse was highly fascinated with the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism, which were reflected in many of his novels, including *Siddhartha* (Kumari 253).

The novel, due to its title, *Siddhartha*, is taken to be inspired by Buddhist philosophy. However, it diverges from conventional Buddhist teachings. The novel carries many elements of Buddhism. For instance, the story implicitly references the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha. The truths encompass pain, its genesis, cessation, and the means to end suffering (Nurlaeli). Siddhartha struggles with the transient quality of life in the novel. He embraces the impermanence of life and experiences, reflecting the Buddhist principle of *Anicca*, which states that all things are temporary and liable to change (Ghimire). The novel includes Gautam Buddha in the "Gotama" chapter (Hesse and Applebaum). However, Siddhartha, while sharing the same name as the actual Buddha and achieving a comparable level of enlightenment, is shown as an opposing figure to Buddha (López 23). On his journey, the protagonist deviates from many central elements of Buddhist philosophy. Instead, he achieves enlightenment by abandoning all practices of Buddhism (Benton and Roberts), which is quite similar to Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta. Shankaracharya, a prominent figure in Indian philosophy, worked extensively on the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta (non-duality), which highlights the idea that reality is non-dual and that the individual self (*Atman*) is inherently connected to the universal awareness (*Brahman*) (Keerthi 408). Shankaracharya's teachings revolve around self-realization, where individuals try to get beyond the false perceptions (formed due to *maya* or *avidya*) of the self and acknowledge their own essence as unadulterated awareness (Frazier 1). The philosophy presented in this context offers a comprehensive structure for comprehending Siddhartha's spiritual odyssey and the recurring themes of self-exploration that permeate Hesse's storytelling.

This study thoroughly examines the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, focusing on the profound connection between its themes and Shankaracharya's concept of self-realization. Through applying Advaita Vedanta, the paper aims to analyze the text and uncover the intricate depths of significance embedded within Siddhartha's pursuit of enlightenment. This study investigates the existential quandaries, spiritual epiphanies, and transformational revelations Siddhartha encounters on his journey.

Difference Between Sankara's Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism

There are fundamental differences between Sankara's Advaita Vedanta and the schools of Buddhism (Benton and Roberts). The significant difference between the two philosophies is how they view self. In the book *Spirited Practices*, Adamson, in his chapter titled "Violence," covers the differences in perspective of self and reality in Advaita and Buddhism (Bishop 45). He states that Advaita Vedanta affirms the presence of an enduring, immutable Self (*Atman*) that underlies the personal experience. This Self is eventually indistinguishable from Brahman, the ultimate reality. This concept proposes the presence of *Brahman*, a supreme and transcendent truth that serves as the fundamental essence of the cosmos. The objective is to achieve a state of self-realization when one recognizes their oneness with Brahman, comprehending that the individual self (*Atman*) is fundamentally inseparable from *Brahman* (Burmistrov 168).

On the other hand, Buddhism rejects the notion of a permanent self (*Anatta*). According to the idea of *Anatta*, the concept of self is considered an illusion, consisting of temporary mental and bodily processes. It rejects the notion of a perpetual, immutable reality, such as *Brahman*. On the contrary, it highlights the concept of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and the lack of a lasting self (*Anatta*). The ultimate objective is to achieve *Nirvana*, a state of release from suffering gained by realizing the genuine essence of reality (Bhikku). According to Advaita Vedanta, the attainment of liberation (*moksha*) is primarily accomplished through the process of self-realization, also referred to as *Atman-jnana*, which involves acquiring awareness of one's authentic essence as being identical to *Brahman*. One usually achieves this understanding by engaging in spiritual activities like meditation, self-examination, and devotion (*bhakti*) (Podder). In Buddhism, the attainment of Liberation (*Nirvana*) is accomplished by following the Noble Eightfold Path, which encompasses moral behaviour, cognitive training, and discernment (Bishop 45). This path encompasses several

disciplines, including mindfulness, meditation, ethical conduct, and the development of wisdom via a deep comprehension of the essence of being (Sankaracharya and Madhavananda).

The Departure of Siddhartha from the Traditional Buddhist Views

As stated earlier, Siddhartha, although sharing the same name as Buddha, deviates from the traditional Buddhist teachings (López 23). Hesse's most fantastic creativity is seen in having Siddhartha, a Brahmin, face the Buddha. Siddhartha and his friend, Govinda, meet Buddha on their journey to find the ultimate self. Govinda decides to stay. However, Siddhartha continues on his journey forward (Gupta et al.). Siddhartha admires the consistent reasoning behind Buddha's worldview, which is founded on the continuous sequence of cause and effect. However, Siddhartha discovers that Buddha's teachings on liberation from suffering transcend the principles of cause and effect. Siddhartha respects Buddha as an enlightened individual. However, he also scrutinizes the coherence of Buddha's reasoning, "But according to your teachings, this unity and logical consequence of all things is broken in one place" (Hesse and Applebaum), thus stopping him from becoming a disciple of Buddha. Siddhartha's intrigue with the Buddha and his decision not to join the Sangha have sparked significant curiosity and varied analyses from critics and readers. The Bishop is amazed by Siddhartha's rejection of adopting Buddha as his mentor. "In a moment of 'epiphany', which has been compared to similar moments of modernist novels, by, for example, Joyce, Musil, or Proust, Siddhartha gains insight into the importance, not of following the right teaching, but of accumulating the right experience" (Bishop 45). As stated earlier, although Siddhartha admires Buddha as an enlightened individual, he doubts the coherence of Buddha's reasoning, which hinders him from completely embracing Buddha's teachings (Butler 117).

On the other hand, Gautama also admonishes him for his excessive intellectual questioning and insatiable need for knowledge (Hesse). Buddha says, "Be aware of too much wisdom" (Hesse and Applebaum 38,39). Gautama is of the view that life is nothing but a game. However, Siddhartha refuses to accept the instructions of the Buddha (Keerthi 408).

The Buddhist tradition contains stories of individuals driven by ego who followed their own beliefs, disregarding instructors' advice and fellow practitioners' wisdom. From this viewpoint, Hesse's main character would be classified as a very self-assured yet misdirected seeker (Benton and Roberts) as he learns from everyday individuals like the ferryman but does not fully engage in the challenging student-teacher dynamic, which is essential in Buddhist

learning. However, Siddhartha values his experiences and intuition over external authority, engaging in individualistic spiritual discovery (Robinson).

Buddhism typically avoids forming solid connections to materialistic pleasures, perceiving them as temporary and causing distress. The Eightfold Path focuses on correcting lifestyle and temperance (Carnahan). Traditional Buddhism aims to achieve Nirvana, a state of freedom from suffering by eliminating desire and attachment (Kumar). However, Siddhartha temporarily embraces pleasure and materialism, pursuing satisfaction via worldly encounters (Hesse and Appelbaum). Siddhartha attains enlightenment and inner peace, yet his journey deviates from the conventional Buddhist concept of *Nirvana* (Keerthi 408). Siddhartha chooses to completely engage with life while remaining detached from its impermanent aspects, achieving enlightenment via self-realization rather than by eliminating desires (López 23).

Although Buddhist teachings and themes inspire *Siddhartha*, they differ from traditional Buddhist doctrines by depicting the protagonist's spiritual journey, rejection of established teachings and authorities, embrace of sensual pleasure, and unique path to enlightenment through individualism and self-actualization (Benton and Roberts).

Siddhartha's Journey of Self-Realization Through the Lens of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta

Hesse's *Siddhartha* is a novel that depicts a spiritual learner who achieves enlightenment via solitary contemplation and living life according to his principles. Siddhartha, the novel's protagonist, is the son of a revered Brahmin who willingly abandons the luxuries and protection of his household to pursue the essence of existence (Hesse and Appelbaum).

The narrative starts with a portrayal of Siddhartha's early years during the era of the original Buddha. In a Brahmin home, he is a clever, bright, and highly esteemed young boy. However, despite his advantages and widespread appeal, Siddhartha remains unsettled and discontent (López 23, Pandey).

At the very beginning of the novel, Siddhartha's discontent with his life is very apparent, as he says he has "the Seeds of discontent" (Hesse 9) and expresses his interest in spiritual knowledge," "Your soul is the whole world" (Hesse 10). Staying in his father's house, Siddhartha engages in ritualistic purification and presents offerings to the deities. He also takes

part in scholarly discourse on religious texts with learned individuals, serving as a mediator and actively honing his debating skills (Kumari). However, he is reluctant to pursue the same path as his father and instead abandons his house to find his way (Pandey). Siddhartha assumes the characteristics of a nomadic individual. His cravings intensify when witnessing specific distressing occurrences in the world, and believe that life is filled with suffering, he thinks, "life is painful" (Hesse 10). He experiences hunger, thirst, and exhaustion and has a solid longing to achieve 'liberation'; he states, "I have always had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, constantly filled with questions"(Hesse 10). To seek the answers to his questions, Siddhartha, along with his friend, Govinda, sets on a journey. Siddhartha's journey is quite like the propounded of Advaita Vedanta. Adi Shankaracharya, also in his short life (32 years), abandoned his Brahmin household and travelled across India for enlightenment and liberation. On his journey, Sankara engaged in successful debates with followers of Shaivite, Shakta, Auhatha, Buddhist, and Jainist traditions and emerged victorious. He also wrote numerous commentaries on many *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Bhrahamsutras*, through an Advaita Vedantic perspective (Sharma).

As Siddhartha continues his journey, his need for salvation intensifies (Gupta et al.). On his journey, he becomes part of a community of shamans and renounces many joys often associated with youth; he participates in fasting, practicing meditation, and experiencing significant pain and hardship. However, these ascetic activities need to be improved for his ultimate goal. He believes that the teachings of his respected father and the knowledgeable Brahmans are not enough to satisfy his craving for spiritual knowledge. Despite imparting significant knowledge to his mind, the vessel remains unfilled even after all the efforts. He believes that despite the extensive discussions in religious texts and anthems about God's creation, they have not addressed his doubts and uncertainties. He is troubled by the questions about self, as he states:

And where was Atman to be found, where did He reside, where did his eternal heartbeat, where else but in one's own-self, in its innermost part, in its indestructible part, which everyone had in himself? But where, where was this self, this innermost part, this ultimate part? It was not flesh and bone, it was neither thought nor consciousness...(Hesse 9)

He understands that the *Atman* is the ultimate source of knowledge, whereas texts and religious procedures like ablutions are only components of it and do not lead to enduring bliss or spiritual satisfaction. Even his father, the most knowledgeable in the scriptures, has not

attained the condition of transformation and blissfulness. Despite dedicating his entire life to religion and religious rituals, he has just remained ‘a thirsty man’ (Carnahan). He aims to undergo metamorphosis by realizing his self, the Atman, which he is eager to understand as he searches, “It had to be found, the pristine source in one’s self, it had to be possessed! Everything else was searching, was a detour, was getting lost” (Frazier 1).

Sankara addresses the concept of *Atman* in his commentary on *Bhramasutrabhashya*, in many verses, 1.1.2, 1.1.13, states that ‘all are Brahman’ and ‘from that (*Brahman*) arises all beings’ (Gambhirnanda). Advaita Vedanta equates *Brahman* to *Atman* (Sharma). Vedanta asserts the existence of a universal mind known as *Brahman*, within which the whole universe exists. The fundamental essence of *Brahman* is impersonal and absolute. *It* possesses infinite knowledge and unlimited power and is present everywhere. He is both impersonal and personal, transcending definition. All things are Brahman, yet *Brahman* is indefinable (Butler 117).

As Siddharth continues his journey forward, he encounters Gautama, the Buddha, the man who had achieved enlightenment. Gautama admonishes him for his excessive intellectual questioning and insatiable need for knowledge (Hesse and Appelbaum). Buddha warns him to be on his guard against being too clever, as according to Gautama, life is only a game. Although Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta, also treats this world as unreal and calls it a play of *Maya* (ignorance) or *avidya* (nescience), unlike Buddha, Sankara does not discard this world, he states by giving the age-old example of the serpent and the rope, just as one can get scared by assuming a rope for a snake due to the nescience and once he acknowledges the truth of rope being falsely identified as snake, the truth is revealed. Similarly, this world is identified as real due to *Maya*; however, upon achieving liberation, ultimate reality (*Brahman*) is revealed. However, this present world and its components play an essential role in leading towards *Brahman* (Sharma). S. Radhakrishnan, a Sanskrit scholar, clearly describes Sankara’s view that only some can go on a more advanced path by first meeting the prerequisites of a less advanced one. He emphasizes the significance of feeling disgruntled and dissatisfied, especially in this world created by the play of *Maya*, as these emotions are essential prerequisites for any moral transformation and spiritual rebirth (Radhakrishnan).

This is also the case with Siddhartha in Hesse’s novel. He does not entirely discard the pleasures of this world. In the second half of the narrative, it becomes evident that he remains

ensnared by the constraints of existence (Hesse). He encounters a stunning woman named Kamala and indulges in the pleasures of romantic affection. Kamala, an exquisite courtesan, imparts knowledge about the significance of physical love as a fundamental pillar of spirituality. Kamaswami, an astute entrepreneur, divulges the intricacies of materialism. Siddhartha assimilates significant teachings from each of these individuals (Hesse). He falls into the play of Maya, ultimately realizing the futility of it; he runs away, yielding to the river's singing and chanting "OM," achieving perfection and stops struggling and suffering (Humari 253).

Thus, Siddhartha found his inner self via a sequence of circumstances that revitalized and awakened him,

Then, out of remote areas of his soul, out of past times of his now weary life, a sound stirred up. It was a word, a syllable, which he, without thinking, with a slurred voice, spoke to himself, the old word which is the beginning and the end of all prayers of the Brahmins, the holy "Om" (Hesse 93)

As Siddhartha tried to end himself in the river to escape, his spirit was revitalized by the sacred sound *Om*. Hesse asserts that the voice sprang from his past, suggesting that his awareness of *Brahman* and the eternal nature of existence is dependent on his prior experiences (Hesse and Appelbaum).

Om! and again he knew about Brahman, knew about the indestructibility of life, knew about all that is divine, which he had forgotten. (Hesse 93)

As the river was enlightening him, he recognized that his misdeeds had paradoxically enabled him to start over. Discovering Atman within himself by relinquishing his ability to reason indicated that his accurate inner compass led him towards peace. Hesse writes:

He proclaimed, "I had to sink to the greatest mental depths, ...in order to experience grace, ...to sleep deeply and awaken refreshed again" (Hesse 94)

Siddhartha realizes that information may be communicated, but wisdom cannot be passed on. He ultimately narrows it down to Atman or Brahman being an outcome of experience (Hesse and Appelbaum). Sankara also writes, in his commentary on the

Brahamsutras, that ultimately, all language, teachers, and scriptures are all tools that can lead to Brahman. However, one can only know it through experience (Gambhirnanda). Direct intuition (*anubhava*) of the Brahman, unconstrained by reason and language, is what Sankara promotes instead of reason as a way of overcoming all kinds of psychological illusion (Ghimire). Once a person reaches enlightenment, the distinction between this world, the metaphysical realm, and the many levels of enlightenment becomes insignificant to him (Ghimire). The last word on *Brahman* from Sankara's end is *neti neti* (not this, not this). The two occurrences of 'not' in the formula '*neti neti*' underscore the idea that everything that may be seen as an object is fundamentally not real. They encompass the entirety of objective existence and indicate that it is not real. The only way to describe *Brahman* is by using this negation approach (Sharma).

Siddhartha also follows this Vedantic method of *neti neti* to reach *Brahman*. At the novel's very beginning, Siddhartha negates and eliminates his father's teachings, as he believes that his father and other mentors have already imparted to him the pinnacle of knowledge inside the Vedic faith. They need to gain the understanding to comprehend the realization of the Self or *Atman* (McRae-McMahon). He then negates the teachings of the Samanas as he starts to follow the path of self-denial by willingly causing his body to suffer through hunger and thirst. He clears his mind of all ideas and thoughts through meditation, leaving it empty. Though short-term, these paths take him away from himself, but in the end, they bring him back. Later on, Siddhartha also rejects Buddha and Buddhist teachings, acknowledging that causation is only a pedagogical tool even if he has not yet grasped the concept of *Atman* (McRae-McMahon). He says to Buddha,

These are your teachings of overcoming the world and of salvation. However, with this small gap, with this small breach, the entire eternal and uniform law of the world is breaking apart again and becomes void. Please forgive me for expressing this objection (Hesse 40).

Thus, he continues his journey after negating causation. The chapter 'Awakening' explores Siddhartha's encounter with the material world, also known as Samsara. It starts with an innocuous realization when he becomes conscious of his unique self, or *jiva*. He abandons his pursuit of realizing the true Self and begins identifying himself with the physical body, senses, and mind. Due to this lack of knowledge, he is trapped by the mistaken beliefs of the self and possessions (*Maya*). He says,

That I know nothing about myself, that Siddhartha has remained thus alien and unknown to me, stems from one cause, a single cause: I was afraid of myself, I was fleeing from myself! I searched Atman, I searched Brahman, I was willing to dissect myself and peel off all of its layers, to find the core of all peels in its unknown interior, the Atman, life, the divine part, the ultimate part. But I have lost myself in the process. (Hesse 42)

Siddhartha rejects Samsara after experiencing its joys and sorrows, says goodbye to his love, Kamala, and ventures into the jungle, where he encounters the enlightened Vasudeva. Siddhartha opts for the road of knowledge, known as jnana yoga, to attain self-realization or realization of the *Atman* (Halfbass). The last phase is using the knowledge and understanding of the Absolute (*Brahman*). Siddhartha understands that he is Pure Consciousness, a subject devoid of any object. He embodies Pure Existence and is one with all existence since everything exists within him. Hesse conveys this concept through the river's voice, which contains several interlaced voices that unite into one sound, *OM* (Upadhyay).

He says:

When he did not tie his soul to any particular voice and submerged his self into it, when he heard them all, perceived that whole, the oneness, then the great song of thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was OM: the perfection (Hesse 149).

Conclusion

This study delved into the complex connection between Herman Hesse's Siddhartha and the school of thought of Advaita Vedanta, as elucidated by Adi Shankara. Proving a specific philosophical connection to a work of fiction can be difficult, but this study indicates a strong and significant interaction between the novel and Advaita Vedanta. The novel *Siddhartha* is commonly believed to be influenced by Buddhist philosophy, although it deviates from traditional Buddhist teachings. In the novel, Siddhartha's protagonist embarks on a spiritual journey and attains enlightenment through self-reflection and adherence to his personal beliefs (Benton and Roberts). However, his concepts diverge from the core principles of Buddhist teachings. Despite sharing the same name as the historical Buddha and attaining a similar degree of enlightenment, Siddhartha is portrayed as a contrasting figure to the Buddha (López). Siddhartha encourages reflection on the relationship between academic development and spiritual progress, similar to Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta (Benten and Roberts). Throughout Siddhartha's journey, notable similarities were observed with the fundamental principles of Advaita Vedanta, such as Siddhartha's firm refusal of conventional teachings

resonating with the *jnana yoga* (path of knowledge) highlighted by Advaita. The individual demonstrates a proactive pursuit of wisdom by engaging in various experiences, reflecting the Vedantic concept of transcending mere intellectual comprehension (Gupta and Garg). His journey exemplifies the *neti neti* approach, continuously denying every experience and identity to reveal his authentic self. This aligns with the Advaita concept of removing layers of illusion (*Maya*) to access the *Atman*, the true Self (Ghimire). The final image of Siddhartha uniting with the meandering river brings to mind the Advaita concept of *Brahman*, the fundamental reality that permeates all aspects of existence. Acknowledging the presence of Buddhist influences and Hesse's artistic liberty, the paper has emphasized notable convergences with Advaita Vedanta. Siddhartha's journey aligns with the fundamental Advaita concepts of self-discovery through experience, deconstructing the ego, and ultimately understanding the interconnectedness of all existence.

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