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## Hermann Hesse's Philosophy about Eastern Religions as Reflected in *Siddhartha*

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### **Abstract:**

When Hermann Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1946, the English-speaking world barely knew who he was. His few translated works had not been well received. *Demian* (translated into English in 1923) was brushed aside as a “nightmare of abnormality, a crazed dream of a paranoiac.” *Steppenwolf* (translated in 1929) was disposed of as “a peculiarly unappetizing conglomeration of fantasy, philosophy, and moist eroticism.” In the 1950s, after Hesse won the Nobel Prize, publishers began scrambling for translations of his work, including *Siddhartha*, which was translated in 1951. Hesse himself was doubtful that the American public would ever be taken by his inward-directed individualism and, for a time, he seemed correct. In the 1960s, however, the readers became intrigued by Hesse. Those in middle age were disenchanted and the youth were rebellious. Skepticism and cynicism were widespread. Hesse’s individualism – his disparagement of modern society but firm faith in the meaningfulness of life – were a welcome antidote to the twentieth century’s bleaker view of things. Hesse became a rallying point for protest and change, a kindred soul, an inspiration for an enthusiastic following of dissidents, seekers, and estranged loners who were drawn from both the establishment and the counterculture. In the following paper, an attempt has been made to explain that while *Siddhartha* draws heavily from Eastern religions in its themes, Hesse’s philosophy diverges in some ways, and the author concludes that one’s philosophy is a personal journey for each individual to discover.

**Keywords:** Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, philosophy, Eastern Religions.

Hermann Hesse referred to his novels as “biographies of the soul.” In *Siddhartha* (1922), the title character is an exceptionally intelligent Brahman, a member of the highest caste in the Hindu religion, who seemingly has a well-ordered existence yet feels spiritually hollow. Siddhartha embarks on a journey of self-discovery that takes him through a period of asceticism and self-denial followed by one of sensual indulgence. An encounter with Buddha is intellectually meaningful but not spiritually affecting, and Siddhartha continues his own search, ultimately finding peace by a river. Siddhartha's search for truth and identity, the “inward journey” as Hesse referred to this recurring theme in his work, is reflective of the autobiographical and introspective nature of Hesse's writing. Hesse's works are distinctive, challenging, and unlike most of the works of Western writers. He has enjoyed periods of great popularity as well as periods of either neglect and even scorn. Although his receipt of the 1946 Nobel Prize for Literature spurred a flurry of translations, which included the 1951 English translation of *Siddhartha*, his works did not gain much recognition in the English-speaking world until the 1960s. Hesse excelled in the depiction of personal crisis and private agony; such literature seems to be particularly popular during periods of cultural crisis, which accounts by and large for Hesse's idolization in Germany immediately after two devastating wars. He was similarly venerated in the world during the politically and socially chaotic 1960s and 1970s.

After the 1904 publication of *Peter Camenzind*, Hermann Hesse's following grew with each subsequent book and began a popularity that rose and fell dramatically, as it still seems to continue to do. German readers felt comfortable with his traditional stories and poetry, and by 1914, when World War I broke out, he had become a pleasant reading habit. The tide changed with his wartime essays, which disparaged militarism and nationalism and censured Germany. Hesse was quickly reduced to an undesirable draft dodger and traitor. In the sociopolitically chaotic postwar years, the tide turned back. The apotheosizing of the individual and the apolitical gospel of self-knowledge and self-realization presented in *Demian* (published in 1919) struck a resonant chord in German youth, for whom Hesse became their idol and *Demian* their bible. But youth's exaltation was short-lived; spreading communism on one hand and budding National Socialism on the other proved to be too enticing. During the Weimar Republic, from 1919 to 1933, Hesse's popularity declined. By the mid 1930s, he was on the blacklist of virtually every newspaper and periodical in Germany. The scholarly interest in him also grew progressively less favorable and

politically – tainted negative criticism began to be heard. Hesse now became a rank “Jew-lover” and an example of the insidious poisoning of the German soul by Freud’s psychoanalysis. This trend culminated in the strident political and literary rejection of Hesse in Hitler’s Germany between 1933 and 1945.

With the collapse of National Socialism in 1945 and Hesse’s Nobel Prize in 1946, German critics and scholars, like Germany’s reading public, rediscovered the author. For the next decade, he enjoyed both political and literary approval as never before. An undesirable German of questionable literary merits had become a man of insight, foresight, and humanity, an heir to the noblest heritage of the German people, a guide and inspiration for his fellow authors. Yet again, the fickle German literary community switched gears. By the late 1950s, there was a sudden and sharp decrease in scholarly and public interest and by the 1960s, Hesse was virtually dead as a writer of importance in Germany. But still another wave of interest in Hesse began to spread in Germany in the early 1970s. The occasion of this last revival, in which many of the most discerning studies of his work were done, was in large part the discovery of Hesse in America in the 1960s.

When Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1946, the English-speaking world barely knew who he was. His few translated works had not been well received. *Demian* (translated into English in 1923) was brushed aside as a “nightmare of abnormality, a crazed dream of a paranoiac.” *Steppenwolf* (translated in 1929) was disposed of as “a peculiarly unappetizing conglomeration of fantasy, philosophy, and moist eroticism.” In the 1950s, after Hesse won the Nobel Prize, publishers began scrambling for translations of his work, including *Siddhartha*, which was translated in 1951. Hesse himself was doubtful that the American public would ever be taken by his inward-directed individualism and, for a time, he seemed correct. In the 1960s, however, the American public became intrigued by Hesse. Those in middle age were disenchanted and the youth were rebellious. Skepticism and cynicism were widespread. For many, and for its youth in particular, America had become a stifling, excessively materialistic, morally and culturally bankrupt society. Hesse’s individualism – his disparagement of modern society but firm faith in the meaningfulness of life – were a welcome antidote to the twentieth century’s bleaker view of things. Hesse became a rallying point for protest and change, a kindred soul, an inspiration for an enthusiastic following of dissidents, seekers, and estranged loners who were drawn from both the establishment and the counterculture. By the time all of Hesse’s novels, short stories,

essays, poetry, and letters were available in English in the 1970s, the tide that had swept across America in the mid-1960s had peaked, but not before almost fifteen million copies of Hesse's works had been sold within a decade – a literary phenomenon without precedent in America.

American Hesse scholarship followed in the wake of the general public's attraction to him. Scholarly activity accelerated in the mid-1960s and crested in 1973-74, a few years after the reading community had already begun to lose its interest. Scholarly activity tapered off to a slow but steady flow. Still, American Hesse scholarship is now second in quantity only to its German counterpart and has outstripped it in quality.

Clearly, the most obvious and significant aspect of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is its use of images, themes, and ideas drawn from Eastern religions. Having both travelled to India and studied extensively about Indian religions, Hesse was able to integrate a substantial understanding of Eastern religious traditions into his novel. In fact, *Siddhartha* does such a good job of developing Eastern religious themes that it has been published in India, and Indian critics have generally praised its sensitive understanding of their religious traditions.

From beginning to end, virtually every aspect of *Siddhartha* develops out of Hesse's knowledge of Eastern religions. For example, many of the characters are named after either Hindu or Buddhist gods:

*Siddhartha* is the personal name of the Buddha, Vasudeva is one of the names of Krishna, and Kamala's name is derived from Kama, the Hindu god of erotic love. In addition, Hesse bases most of the novel's themes on various Hindu or Buddhist principles. For example, *Siddhartha* seeks to gain an understanding of both Atman, the individual soul, and Brahma, the universal soul that unifies all beings. In order to achieve this understanding, however, he must experience a vision that reveals to him the true meaning of Om, the sacred word that Hindus chant when meditating upon the cosmic unity of all life. The vast majority of *Siddhartha*'s philosophical and religious questions develops out of his attempt to understand these religious principles or other themes drawn from Eastern religions such as meditation, fasting, renunciation, timelessness, transcending suffering, etc. While it would take an entire book to explain all of the religious ideas that Hesse develops in his novel, he generally presents at least a basic description of these ideas within the book itself. Consequently, readers can at least get a rudimentary understanding of these ideas even if

they do not understand all of the subtle complexities of Eastern religious thought.

Not only does Hesse borrow names, themes, and ideas from Eastern religions, but he also bases and structures his narrative on the life of the historical Buddha. Much like Siddhartha in Hesse's novel, the historical Buddha was born into a wealthy family, but he renounced his wealth to live as an ascetic. After several years of self-denial, however, he came to realize the errors of asceticism. After leaving behind his austere life, he meditated under a Bodhi tree until he received Nirvana (or complete Enlightenment), and then he spent the rest of his life trying to help others reach Nirvana. This is very similar to the path that Siddhartha follows in the novel as he passes through similar stages of wealth, renunciation, meditation, enlightenment, and striving to teach others.

In addition to structuring the novel according to the Buddha's life, Hesse also structures the novel according to various principles found in the Buddha's teachings. In fact, several of the chapters are named after specific religious principles. For example, the chapter titled "Awakening" describes how Siddhartha comes to recognize the Buddhist belief that the path to enlightenment must be rooted in the here and now instead of focusing on other distant or transcendent worlds. In addition, the chapter titled "Samsara" describes how Siddhartha is caught in a continuous cycle of death and rebirth because he has not yet achieved a state of total enlightenment or Nirvana, and the chapter titled "Om" describes how Siddhartha eventually escapes from Samsara to achieve a vision of the essential unity of all things. These chapter titles accurately describe the spiritual development that Siddhartha undergoes in each chapter, and these stages of spiritual development provide the structure that organizes both the novel's development as a narrative and Siddhartha's development as a character. Even the chapters that are not titled after a specific religious principle usually represent Siddhartha's progress toward understanding some religious principle, and many of these principles are taken directly from the Buddha's teachings about the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path.

Nevertheless, even though Hesse develops both his themes and his narrative structure based on Eastern religious principles, there are several ways in which Siddhartha alters these concepts so that it is not simply an accurate description of Hinduism or Buddhism. For example, when the Buddha teaches Siddhartha about his religious beliefs, Siddhartha admires them, but he does not choose to follow them. Similarly, the historical Buddha finds enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, but Siddhartha's dream under the tree

only helps him better understand the questions that he is seeking to understand. It provides him with new issues to consider, but it does not give him any final answers. In these respects, Hesse seems to suggest that he considers Eastern religions very useful guides to philosophical and spiritual understanding but ultimately considers knowledge a personal experience that cannot be codified into any religious rituals and dogmas. The conclusion to the novel makes this clear, when Siddhartha explains his fundamental distrust of all words and beliefs. He still embraces the goal of enlightenment and universal oneness, but he follows his own personal path instead of just following the Buddha's or anyone else's doctrines. In this sense, Hesse's novel develops an individualistic perspective that is perhaps more Western than Eastern. Because of these kinds of western elements, critics such as Mark Boulby, Robert Conrad, and Theodore Ziolkowski argue that Siddhartha advances more Western ideas than it does Eastern ones.

Although Siddhartha explores a wide variety of philosophical and religious themes, it focuses most specifically on three principal themes: the nature of the self, the nature of knowledge, and the essential unity of all things. From the very beginning of the novel, Siddhartha has a fierce longing to probe beneath the surface of life and discover the deeper layers of the self. Consequently, he refuses to simply follow the paths established by various religions – not because these religions are bad but because they focus on external rather than internal beliefs. Siddhartha is more interested in understanding his own self than he is in simply following the ideas created by others. As the novel progresses, Siddhartha explores deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the self as he rejects his home, his friend Govinda, all religious dogmas, and everything else that might cause him to compromise his intense personal vision. As Siddhartha abandons these hindrances to self-knowledge, he comes to understand the essential mysteries of the self.

In addition, Siddhartha is deeply concerned with the question of knowledge. Throughout the novel, he asks deep questions about the nature of knowledge: what is knowledge, how is it obtained, and how can it be taught to others? In fact, much of Hesse's interest in the self is intimately connected to his interest in the nature of knowledge since Hesse develops a view of knowledge that makes the self the primary means of discovering knowledge. Because Hesse locates the origin of knowledge in the self rather than in some set of beliefs, he is distrustful of any attempt to communicate or teach knowledge to others. As Siddhartha explains to the Buddha after listening to his teachings,

even if a person has experienced some vision of the essential nature of life, they cannot give that knowledge to someone else because they cannot give someone else the experiences through which they obtained their knowledge. They can talk about the ideas they have learned and the principles they believe, but they cannot communicate their personal experiences, aspects which Hesse believes are the most important part of knowledge.

By the end of the novel, Siddhartha has progressed to a point where the first two questions of the self and knowledge have become less important because he increasingly focuses on understanding the essential unity of all things. As Siddhartha explains to Govinda at the end of the novel, the self is a transitory being whose ultimate meaning can only be found by understanding its connection to all other beings instead of by exploring its own isolated, transitory, individual existence. Siddhartha experiences a vision of this oneness of life while he is meditating on the river. During this visionary experience, he comes to realize that endless flowing of the river symbolizes how all of the various forms and aspects of life flow into each other to form a single whole. The river, like Brahman and Buddha-nature, encompasses the entirety of existence in all of its diverse manifestations, and the meaning of this essential unity is best expressed through the sacred Hindu word, “Om.” This word expresses a unity that transcends all barriers of time, difference, oppositions, and illusions to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings. While some critics see this final epiphany as expressing the essence of Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, others see it as representing western philosophies such as Christianity or existentialism. Some even see it as Hesse’s own personal religion, made up from an eclectic mixture of all of these traditions. Certainly, a good case can be made for each interpretation, so every reader must ultimately come to his or her own conclusion regarding how to interpret Siddhartha’s final epiphany. In the end, however, it is perhaps less important to decide how to categorize Siddhartha’s vision than to listen to it, think about it, and try to learn from it. Whatever its source, it offers profound insights into the human condition. Consequently, regardless of how it is interpreted, Siddhartha’s vision presents a remarkable exploration of the deepest philosophical and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

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