



SIDDHARTHA

HERMANN HESSE

Hermann Hesse was born in 1877 and grew up in a missionary family whose religious beliefs deeply influenced him. His best-known works include *Siddhartha*, which explores authenticity, self-knowledge and spirituality.

Siddhartha grew up with his respected Brahmin father in India. Everyone in his village expects Siddhartha to be a successful Brahmin. He enjoys a privileged existence alongside his friend Govinda, but becomes disillusioned with his life and sets out to become an ascetic. Although at home he performs all the rituals of his

religion, he does not think it will ultimately bring him inner peace. He dutifully performs these rituals but this does not bring him happiness and peace. He believes that the Brahmins will not achieve enlightenment. He therefore sets out on long and painful voyage of self-discovery and joins the Samanas, who

believe enlightenment can be reached through asceticism. Later, he becomes entranced by the beautiful courtesan and lives in the material world. But, after spending time there, he finds the middle way as a ferryman. The river teaches Siddhartha is that time does not exist, and that the present is all that matters.

SIDDHARTHA

LESSON 1

In the shade of the house, in the sunshine of the riverbank near the boats and the forest, in the shelter of the fig tree is where Siddhartha grew up, the handsome son of a **Brahman**, together with his friend Govinda, also the son of a Brahman.

The sun tanned his shoulders by the banks of the river when bathing as he performed the sacred **ablutions** and the sacred offerings.

In the mango grove, the sun poured into his black eyes when he was playing as a boy, where his mother sang, where the sacred offerings were made, where his father, the scholar, taught him, where the wise men talked.

For a long time, Siddhartha had been partaking in the discussions of the wise men, practicing debate with Govinda, the art of reflection and the service of meditation.

He already knew how to speak the **Om** silently, the word of words, to speak it silently into himself while inhaling, to speak it silently out of himself while exhaling, with all the concentration of his soul, the forehead surrounded by the glow of

the clear-thinking spirit. He already knew to feel **Atman** in the depths of his being, indestructible, at one with the universe.

Joy leapt in his father's heart for his son who was quick to learn and thirsty for knowledge; he saw him growing up to become great wise man and priest, a prince among the Brahmans.

Bliss leapt in his mother's breast when she saw him, when she saw him walking, sit down and get up. Siddhartha was the strong, handsome boy who was walking on slender legs and greeting her with perfect respect.

Love touched the hearts of the Brahmans' young daughters when Siddhartha walked through the lanes of the town with the luminous forehead, with the eye of a king, with his slim hips.

But more than all the others he was loved by Govinda, his friend. He loved Siddhartha's eyes and sweet voice, he loved his walk and the perfect decency of his movements, he loved everything Siddhartha did and said and what he loved most of all was his spirit, his **transcendent**,

fiery thoughts, his ardent will, his **high calling**.

Govinda knew he would not become a common Brahman, not a lazy official in charge of offerings; not a greedy merchant with magic spells; not a vain, **vacuous** speaker; not a mean, deceitful priest; and also not a decent, stupid sheep in the herd of the many.

No, Govinda, did not want to become one of those, not one of those tens of thousands of Brahmans. He wanted to follow Siddhartha, the beloved, the splendid. And in the days to come, when Siddhartha would become a god and join the glorious, then Govinda wanted to follow him as his friend, his companion, his servant, his spear-carrier, his shadow. Siddhartha was loved by everyone. He was a source of joy and a delight for them all.

But he, Siddhartha, was not a source of joy for himself and found no delight in himself. Walking the rosy paths of the fig tree garden, sitting in the bluish shade of the grove of contemplation, washing his limbs daily in the bath of repentance, sacrificing in the

SIDDHARTHA

LESSON 1

dim shade of the mango forest, his gestures of perfect decency, in everyone's love and joy, he still lacked joy in his own heart.

Dreams and restless thoughts came into his mind, flowing from the water of the river, sparkling from the stars of the night, melting from the beams of the sun, dreams came to him and a restlessness of the soul, fuming from the sacrifices, breathing forth from the verses of the **Rigveda**, being infused into him, drop by drop, from the teachings of the old Brahmans.

Siddhartha had started to nurse discontent in himself, he had started to feel that the love of his father and the love of his mother, and also the love of his friend, Govinda, would not bring him joy for ever, would not nurse him, feed or satisfy him.

He had started to suspect that his **venerable** father and his other teachers, that the wise Brahmans had already revealed to him the best of their wisdom, that they had already filled him with their richness. But the vessel was not full, the spirit was not content, the soul was not calm

and the heart was not satisfied.

The ablutions were good, but they were water, they did not wash off the sin, they did not heal the spirit's thirst, they did not relieve the fear in his heart. The sacrifices and the **invocation** of the gods were excellent, but was that all? Did the sacrifices give a happy fortune? And what about the gods? Was it really **Prajapati** who had created the world? Was it not the Atman, the only, the singular one?

Were the gods not creations, created like me and you, subject to time, mortal? Was it therefore good, was it right, was it meaningful and of the highest occupation to make offerings to the gods? For whom else were offerings to be made, who else was to be worshipped but the only one, the Atman?

And where was Atman to be found, where did he reside, where did his **eternal** heart beat, where else but in one's own self, in its innermost part, in its indestructible part, which everyone had in himself? But where was this self, this innermost part, this ultimate part of him that he had little knowledge of?

It was not flesh and bone, it was neither thought nor consciousness, as the wisest ones taught. So, where was it? To reach this place, the self, himself, there had to be a more complete way to attain his highest goal. Was this not worthwhile searching for?

Nobody had shown him this way, nobody knew it, not the father and not the teachers and wise men, not the holy sacrificial songs. They knew everything, the Brahmans and their holy books, didn't they?

They had taken care of everything, even the creation of the world, the origin of speech, of food, of inhaling and exhaling, the arrangement of the senses. While it was valuable to know all of this, not knowing the most important thing of all, the self, was insufficient.

Surely, many verses of the holy books, particularly in the **Upanishads**, the holy texts in the Vedic Sanskrit language, spoke of this innermost and ultimate thing. "Your soul is the whole world," it was written there. And it was written that man in his sleep, in his deep sleep, would meet with his innermost self and would reside in the Atman.

SIDDHARTHA

LESSON 1

Not to be looked down upon was the tremendous amount of enlightenment which lay there, collected and **preserved** by generations of wise Brahmans. But where were the Brahmans, or priests, the wise men or **penitents**, who had succeeded in not just knowing this deepest of all knowledge but also lived it?

Where was the knowledgeable one who brought his **familiarity** with the Atman out of sleep into the state of being awake, into life and every step of each word and deed? Siddhartha knew many **venerable** Brahmans, chiefly his father, the pure one, the scholar, the most venerable one.

His father was to be admired, quiet and noble were his manners, pure his life, wise his words, delicate and noble his thoughts, but even he, who knew so much, did he live in blissfulness, did he have peace? Was he not also just a searching, thirsty man?

Did he not, again and again, have to drink from holy sources as a thirsty man, from the offerings, from the books, from the disputes of the Brahmans? Why did he, the

irreproachable one, have to wash off his sins and strive for a cleansing every day?

Was the Atman not in him, did not the **pristine** source spring from his heart? It had to be found in one's own self, it had to be **possessed**. Everything else was searching and a **detour**. These were Siddhartha's thoughts, this was his thirst and his suffering.

This was the heavenly world he had never reached completely, the world in which he had never quenched his ultimate thirst. And among all the wise men he knew and whose instructions he had received, who had reached it completely, who had quenched it completely, the **eternal** thirst?

"Govinda," Siddhartha said to his friend, "come with me under the **Banyan tree**, let's practise meditation." They went to the Banyan tree and sat down, Govinda twenty paces away from him.

While sitting himself down, ready to speak the Om, Siddhartha repeatedly murmured the verse: Om is the bow, the arrow is the soul,

the Brahman is the arrow's target that one should **incessantly** hit.

After the usual time of the exercise in meditation had passed, Govinda rose. The evening had come and it was time to perform the evening's ablution. He called Siddhartha's name.

Siddhartha did not answer as he sat there lost in thought, his eyes were rigidly focused towards a distant target, the tip of his tongue was **protruding** a little between the teeth. He seemed not able to breathe.

Once, **Samanas** had travelled through Siddhartha's town, **ascetics** on a pilgrimage, three skinny men, with dusty and bloody shoulders, almost naked and scorched by the sun. They were surrounded by loneliness, strangers and enemies to the world, jackals in the midst of humans.

In the evening, after the hour of contemplation, Siddhartha spoke to Govinda: "Early tomorrow morning, my friend, I will go to the Samanas. I will become a Samana." Govinda turned pale when he heard these words and wondered what would become of him.

SIDDHARTHA

LESSON 1

Soon Govinda realised that it was the beginning, that Siddhartha was taking his own way, his fate was beginning to take shape on his own and he turned pallid and feeble, like a dry banana skin.

"Oh Siddhartha," he exclaimed, "will your father permit you to do that?" Siddhartha looked over as if he was just waking up. Arrow-fast he read in Govinda's soul, read the fear and the submission. "Govinda," he spoke quietly, "let's not waste words. Tomorrow at daybreak I will begin the life of a Samana. Speak of it no more."

Siddhartha entered the chamber where his father was sitting. The Brahman said, "Is that you, Siddhartha? Then say what you came to say." Siddhartha said, "with your permission, my father, I have come to tell you that it is my longing to leave your house tomorrow and go to the ascetics. My desire is to become a Samana."

The Brahman fell silent. Then his father spoke. "It is not proper for a Brahman to speak harsh and angry words. But **indignation** is in my heart. I do not wish to hear this

request for a second time from your mouth." Slowly, the Brahman rose. Siddhartha stood silently, his arms folded. Indignant, the father left the chamber and went to lay down on his bed.

After an hour, since no sleep had come, Siddhartha's father stood up, paced to and fro, walked out of the house and saw that the moon had risen. Through the window he looked back inside. There stood Siddhartha, his arms folded. With worry in his heart, his father went back to bed.

He came back after an hour, looked through the small window, saw Siddhartha standing in the moonlight, by the light of the stars, in the darkness, his heart filled with unrest, anguish and sadness. And in the night's last hour, before the day began, he stepped into the room and saw the young man still standing there.

"Siddhartha," he spoke, "what are you waiting for?" "You know what," Siddhartha replied. "Will you always stand that way and wait, until it becomes morning, noon and evening?" "I will stand and wait." "You will become

tired, Siddhartha." "I will become tired."

"You will fall asleep, Siddhartha." "I will not fall asleep." "You will die, Siddhartha." "I will die." "And would you rather die than obey your father?" "Siddhartha had always obeyed his father." "So will you abandon your plan?" "Siddhartha will do what his father tells him to do."

He touched Siddhartha's shoulder. "You will go into the forest and be a Samana. When you have found blissfulness in the forest, then come back and teach me. If you find disappointment, then return and we will make offerings to the gods together.

Go now and kiss your mother, tell her where you are going." A shadow rose near the last hut. "You have come," Siddhartha said to Govinda and smiled. "I have come," replied Govinda.

In the evening they met the ascetics, the skinny Samanas, and offered them their companionship and obedience. They were accepted and started their lives as ascetics.

SIDDHARTHA

VOCABULARY

Brahman: In Hinduism, a Brahman is referred to as the supreme self, which should not be confused with a Brahmin who is an individual belonging to the highest Hindu priestly caste of artists, teachers and technicians.

Ablutions: Ablutions means a ceremonial act of washing parts of the body.

Om: Om is a mantra and mystical Sanskrit sound of Hindu origin in India and Nepal and is sacred in various Dharmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Atman: Atman in Hinduism means "self".

Transcendence: This exists apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe.

High Calling: A high calling means a man is "called" by god or the Buddha to practice his teachings.

Vacuous: Vacuous is having or showing a lack of thought or intelligence, or that someone who is mindless.

Rigveda: The Rigveda is a sacred collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns.

Venerable: Venerable is accorded to someone with a great deal of respect, especially because of age, wisdom or character.

Invocation: An invocation is the summoning, or calling forth, of a deity.

Prajapati: Prajapati in Sanskrit means the "lord of creatures", a Hindu deity presiding over procreation and the protection of life.

Upanishads: The Upanishads are holy texts in the Vedic Sanskrit language.

Atman: The Atman in Hinduism means the self.

Penitents: Penitents are people who confess their sins.

Familiarity: When someone knows something very well and is acquainted with it.

Venerable: Deep respect due to impressive actions and dignity.

Irreproachable: To be free from blame.

Pristine: Where something or someone is pure, unblemished.

Possessed: To belong to oneself and have power over yourself.

Detour: To take an indirect path when the main route is blocked.

Eternal: Something that lasts forever.

Banyan tree: After attaining enlightenment, Lord Buddha is believed to have sat under a Banyan tree for seven days.

Incessantly: Ceaselessly, unendingly.

Rigidly: Firmly fixed, inflexibly, motionlessly.

Protruding: To stick out.

Samanas: Wandering ascetics or religious people trying to achieve a spiritual state through extreme self-denial.

Indignation: Strong feeling of displeasure about something.

SIDDHARTHA

Q&A

Question 1: Why didn't Govinda think Siddhartha would become a common Brahman?

Question 5: Who were the Samanas and what did they hope to achieve in the midst of humans?

Overview: Write in your own words what you thought of the story so far and your interpretation of its meaning.

Question 2: What doubts did Siddhartha have about his religion, teachers and wise men?

Question 6: Siddhartha had always obeyed his father, so why did he decide to become a Samana against his father's wishes?

Question 3: Where did Siddhartha think the Atman was to be found and why did his eternal heart beat?

Question 7: Siddhartha was going to live in the forest as an ascetic to find blissfulness. What did he hope this would bring to him?

Question 4: If nirvana could not be attained through either thought or consciousness, how could it be reached?

Question 8: A shadow rose near the last hut and Govinda had come to join him? Why do you think he was joining Siddhartha?