



SIDDHARTHA

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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.

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Siddhartha gave his garments to a poor Brahman in the street. He wore nothing more than the **loincloth**, an earth-coloured, unsown cloak. He ate only once a day and never anything cooked. He **fasted** for fifteen days, then he fasted again for twenty-eight days.

The flesh **waned** from his thighs and cheeks. Feverish dreams flickered from his enlarged eyes, long nails grew slowly on his parched fingers and a dry, **shaggy** beard grew on his chin.

He saw merchants trading, princes hunting, mourners grieving for their dead, whores offering themselves, doctors trying to help the sick, and mothers nursing their children. All of this was not worthy of a look from his eyes as it was all lies, it stank of lies.

It all pretended to be meaningful and joyful and beautiful, but it was just hidden **putrefaction**. The world tasted bitter and life was torture. But a goal stood before Siddhartha: to become empty of thirst and wishing, of dreams, joy and sorrow.

He wanted to become dead to himself, not to be a self any

more, to find tranquility with an emptied heart, to be open to miracles in unselfish thoughts. That was his goal. Once all of his self was overcome and had died, once every desire and every urge was silent in his heart, then the ultimate part of him would awake, the innermost of his being.

Silently, he stood there in the rain, his hair dripping with water over his freezing shoulders, over freezing hips and legs. He stood there until he could no longer feel the cold in his shoulders and legs any more, until they were silent.

Quietly he **covered** in the thorny bushes, blood dripping from his burning skin, from **festering** wounds dripping pus, Siddhartha stayed rigidly motionless until no blood flowed any more, until nothing stung or burned him any more.

Instructed by the oldest of the Samanas, Siddhartha practised self-denial and meditation. A heron flew over the bamboo forest and Siddhartha accepted it into his soul. He also flew over forest and mountains, ate fish, felt the pangs of a heron's

hunger and died a heron's death. His soul returned but it had died, decayed and was scattered as dust.

Where could he escape from life's cycle, where the end of the causes, where an eternity without suffering began? He had killed his senses and memory, he had slipped out of his self into thousands of other forms: he was an animal, stone, wood and water, only to awake every time to find his old self again.

Siddhartha had learned a lot when he was with the Samanas of the many ways leading away from the self. He went the way of self-denial by means of pain, through voluntarily suffering and overcoming hunger, thirst and tiredness. He went the way of self-denial by means of meditation, through imagining the mind to be void.

Although Siddhartha fled from the self a thousand times, stayed in nothingness, stayed in the animal, in the stone, the return was inevitable, inescapable.

When he found himself back in the sunshine or in the moonlight, in the shade or in

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the moonlight, the shade or the rain, he was once again his self, Siddhartha, and again felt the agony of life's cycle being forced upon him again.

By his side lived Govinda, his shadow. They walked the same paths and undertook the same efforts. They rarely spoke to one another but occasionally the two of them went through the villages to beg for food for themselves and their teachers.

"How do you think, Govinda..." Siddhartha spoke one day while begging. "How do you think we have progressed? Have we reached any goals?" Govinda answered, "We have learned, and we'll continue learning. You'll be a great Samana, Siddhartha. Quickly, you've learned every exercise and the old Samanas admire you. One day you'll be a holy man."

Siddhartha said, "I can't help but feel that it is not like this, my friend. What I've learned, being among the Samanas, I could have learned more quickly in every tavern where the whorehouses are, among the gamblers and whores I could have learned it."

Govinda replied, "Siddhartha, you are playing with me. How could you have learned meditation, holding your breath, insensitivity against hunger and pain there among these **wretched** people?"

Siddhartha said quietly, as if he was talking to himself, "What is meditation? What is leaving one's body? What is fasting? What is holding one's breath? It is fleeing from the self, it is a short escape of the agony of being a self, a short numbing of the senses against the pain and the pointlessness of life."

Govinda replied, "You say so and yet you know that you are a Samana and no drunkard. It's true that a drinker numbs his senses and that he briefly escapes and rests, but he'll return from the delusion to find everything unchanged. He has not become wiser nor gathered enlightenment and risen several steps like us."

Siddhartha spoke with a smile, "I do not know, I've never been a drunkard. All I know is that I find only a short numbing of the senses in my exercises and meditations and that I am just as far removed from wisdom and salvation as a child in the

mother's womb. This I know, Govinda."

Govinda said, "We are not going around in circles, we are moving up, the circle is a spiral and we have already ascended many a level." Siddhartha answered, "How old, do you think, is our oldest Samana, our venerable teacher?" "Our oldest one might be about sixty years of age," replied Govinda.

"He has lived for sixty years and has not reached nirvana. He'll turn seventy and eighty, and you and I, we will grow just as old and will do our exercises, fast and meditate, but we will not reach nirvana. He won't and we won't.

"Govinda, I believe out of all the Samanas out there, perhaps not a single one will reach nirvana. We find comfort and numbness, we learn feats to deceive ourselves and others. But the most important thing we will not find.

"Soon, Govinda, your friend will leave the path of the Samanas he has walked along for so long. I'm suffering of thirst, and my thirst remains as strong as it ever was. I must find another way.

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"I always thirsted for knowledge and have been full of questions. I have asked the Brahmins, year after year, and I have asked the holy Vedas. Perhaps, it had been just as well if I had asked a chimpanzee. It took me a long time and I am not finished learning this yet for there is nothing to be learned."

The fragrant myth of Gautama, the Buddha, the wise man, came into the mind of Siddhartha. Buddha possessed the highest enlightenment, he remembered his previous lives, had reached nirvana and never returned into the cycle and was never again submerged in the murky river of physical humanity. He had performed miracles and has spoken to the gods.

On the same day, Siddhartha informed the oldest of the Samanas of his decision, that he wanted to leave him. The Samana became angry and talked loudly and used crude swearwords.

In the town of Savathi, every child knew the name of the **exalted** Buddha, and every house was prepared to fill the alms dish of Gautama's **disciples**, the silently begging

ones. Near the town was Gautama's favourite place to stay, the grove of Jetavana.

Arriving at Savathi, in the very first house, before the door of which they stopped to beg, food had been offered to them. They accepted it and Siddhartha asked the woman, who handed them the food, "We would like to know where the Buddha **dwells**, the most venerable one, for we are two Samanas from the forest and have come to see him and to hear the teachings from his mouth."

The woman said, "You have come to the right place, you Samanas from the forest. You should know, in Jetavana, in the garden of Anathapindika is where the exalted one **dwells**. You pilgrims shall spend the night there, for there is enough space for the **innumerable** who flock here, to hear the Buddha's teachings."

The two Samanas, **accustomed** to life in the forest, found it quickly and, without making any noise, a place to stay and rested there until the morning. At sunrise, they saw with astonishment what a large crowd of believers had also spent the

night there. There were monks walking past in **saffron robes** and under the trees they sat in deep contemplation. But the majority of them were out with their alms dishes collecting food.

The Buddha was also there, modestly and deep in thought, his calm face that was neither happy nor sad. It seemed to smile quietly and inwardly, somewhat resembling a healthy child.

But his face and his walk, his quietly lowered glance, his quietly dangling hand and even every finger expressed peace and perfection that did not search, did not imitate. He breathed softly in an **unwithering** calm and untouchable peace.

In the evening, when the heat cooled down and everyone in the camp started to bustle about and gather around, they heard the Buddha's teachings. They heard the Buddha's voice and it was of perfect calmness and full of peace.

Gautama taught the teachings of suffering, the origin of suffering and the way to relieve suffering.

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Calmly and clearly his quiet speech flowed on. Suffering was life, full of suffering was the world, but salvation from suffering could be found. Salvation was obtained by those who would walk the path of the Buddha. With a soft yet firm voice he taught the four main doctrines and taught the eightfold path. His voice hovered over the listeners like a bright light in a starry sky.

The next day, the two friends continued walking in the grove. For a long time they lay there and found no sleep. Over and over again Govinda urged his friend to tell him why he did not want to seek refuge in Gautama's teachings. But Siddhartha turned him away every time and said, "Be content, Govinda. The teachings of the exalted one are very good, so how could I find fault with them?"

Then Siddhartha walked through the grove alone, lost in thought. He happened to meet Gautama and when he greeted him with respect, the Buddha's glance was full of kindness and calm. The young man **summoned** his courage and asked the venerable one for permission

to talk to him. Silently, Buddha nodded his approval.

Siddhartha said to him quietly, "Yesterday, I had been privileged to hear your wondrous teachings. Together with my friend, I have come from afar to hear your teachings. And now my friend is going to stay with your people and has taken refuge with you. But I will again start on my pilgrimage." "As you please," said Gautama politely.

Siddhartha continued, "One thing I have admired in your teachings is that everything is perfectly clear and proven, that everything which happens is connected, that the great and the small are all **encompassed** by the same forces of time, being and dying. But there is a small gap: the world is breaking apart and has become void. Please forgive me for expressing this objection."

Quietly, Gautama had listened to him, unmoved. Now he spoke, with his kind, polite and clear voice, "You've heard the teachings and it is good that you've thought about it deeply. You've found a gap in it, an error. You should think about this

further. Be warned though, there is nothing to opinions, their goal is not to explain the world to those who seek knowledge. They have a different goal, which is salvation from suffering. This is what Gautama teaches."

"I have not come to argue about words. You are truly right, there is little to opinions," said the young man. "But let me say one more thing: It has come to you in the course of your own search, on your own path, through your own thoughts, meditation, realisations and enlightenment but has not come to you by means of teachings. This is why I am continuing my travels, not to seek other, better teachings, for I know there are none, but to depart from all teachings and all teachers and to reach this goal by myself."

When Siddhartha left the grove the next day, he **pondered** deeply and found it was the self, the purpose and essence of which he sought to learn. It was the self he wanted to free himself from and overcome. But he was not able to overcome it and could only deceive it, flee from it and he knew that he could only hide from it.

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VOCABULARY

Loincloth: A piece of cloth worn around the loins, or hips.

Fasted: To abstain entirely from food and drink.

Wane: To decrease in strength.

Shaggy: Rough and unkempt hair.

Putrefaction: Rotten or decayed.

Cower: To crouch, bend or kneel down.

Festering: Ulcerated wounds.

Wretched: Miserable or desolate.

Exalted: Noble and lofty.

Disciples: Spiritual followers.

Dwell: The place where someone lives.

Innumerable: That which cannot be counted.

Accustomed: Habitual, familiar, usual, normal.

Saffron robes: Cloth of an amber colour worn by monks.

Unwithering: Not fading or wilting.

Bustle: Agitated haste.

Summoned: Called upon.

Encompassed: Surrounded by.

Pondered: Thought about.

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Q&A

Question 1: What did Siddhartha wear when he first joined the Samanas and why did fast for so long?

Question 5: When they heard Gautama's voice, what did they think of him and what was he teaching?

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

Question 2: He thought the world was hidden putrefaction, but what had become his goal?

Question 6: Why do you think Siddhartha tell the Buddha that he must continue with his pilgrimage alone?

Question 3: Do you think the the two men had progressed and why did Siddhartha feel they had not gone very far?

Question 7: What did Gautama think of opinions of those who seek knowledge and what was his goal?

Question 4: Why do you think Siddhartha and Govinda left the Samanas and what was their reaction?

Question 8: What was it that Siddhartha wanted to free himself from and overcome and why?