



# 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 5

Gratefully, he accepted Vasudeva's invitation. When they had reached the bank, he helped him tie the boat to the stakes; after this, the ferryman asked him to enter the hut, offered him bread and water and Siddhartha ate with eager pleasure. He also ate the mango fruits with equal pleasure that Vasudeva had offered to him.

It was almost the time of the sunset. They sat on a log by the bank and Siddhartha told the ferryman about where he originally came from and about his life as he had seen it before his eyes today, in that hour of despair.

Vasudeva listened with great attention. Among the ferryman's virtues, one of the greatest was that he knew how to listen. But at the end of Siddhartha's tale, when he spoke of the tree by the river and the holy Om, and how he had felt such a love for the river, the ferryman listened with double the attention, completely absorbed by it, with his eyes closed.

"You will learn it," spoke Vasudeva, "but not from me. The river has taught me to listen, from it you will learn it as well. It knows everything,

the river, everything can be learned. See, you've already learned this from the water too, that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek depth. You'll learn that other thing from it as well."

Siddhartha asked after a long pause, "What other thing, Vasudeva?"

Vasudeva rose. "It is late," he said, "let's go to sleep. I can't tell you that other thing. You'll learn it, or perhaps you know it already. I am no learned man, I have no special skill in speaking, I also have no special skill in thinking. All I'm able to do is to listen and to be godly, I have learned nothing else. I have transported many, thousands; and to all of them, my river has been nothing but an obstacle on their travels.

"They travel to seek money and business, and for weddings and on pilgrimages, and the river was obstructing their path. The ferryman's job is to get them quickly across that obstacle. But for some among thousands, a few, four or five, the river has stopped being an obstacle, they have heard its voice, they have listened to it, and the river has become sacred to them, as it has

become sacred to me. Let's rest now, Siddhartha."

Siddhartha stayed with the ferryman and learned to operate the boat, and when there was nothing to do at the ferry he worked with Vasudeva in the rice field, gathered wood and plucked the fruit off the banana trees. He learned to build an oar, learned how to mend the boat and to weave baskets.

He was joyful because of everything he learned, and the days and months passed quickly. He was taught by the river. Most of all, he learned from it to listen, to pay close attention with a quiet heart without passion, without a wish, without judgement, without an opinion.

In a friendly manner, he lived side by side with Vasudeva, and occasionally they exchanged some words, few in length. Vasudeva was no friend of words; rarely, Siddhartha succeeded in persuading him to speak. "Did you..." he asked him one time, "did you too learn that secret from the river: that there is no time?" Vasudeva's face was filled with a bright smile. Maybe Siddhartha now knew that other thing.

# SIDDHARTHA

## LESSON 5

"Yes, Siddhartha," he spoke. "It is this what you mean, isn't it: that the river is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountains, everywhere at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the outline of the future?"

"This it is," said Siddhartha. "And when I had learned it I looked at my life and it was also a river; the boy Siddhartha was only separated from the man Siddhartha and from the old man Siddhartha by a shadow, not by something real. Also, Siddhartha's previous births were no past, and his death and his return to Brahma was no future."

Siddhartha spoke with ecstasy; deeply, this enlightenment had delighted him. Was not all suffering time, were not all forms of tormenting oneself being afraid of time, was not everything hard, everything hostile in the world gone and overcome as soon as one had defeated time, as soon as being put out of existence by one's thoughts? Was it not time that must be mastered?

And once again, when the river had increased its flow in the rainy season and made a powerful noise, Siddhartha said, "Isn't it so that the river has many voices? Hasn't it the voice of a king, of a warrior and a bull, of a bird of the night, of a woman giving birth, a sighing man and a thousand other voices more?" "So it is," Vasudeva nodded, "all voices of the creatures are in its voice."

And time after time, his smile became more similar to the ferryman's, became almost just as bright, just as thoroughly glowing with bliss, just like a child's, just as alike to an old man's. Many travellers, seeing the two ferrymen, thought they were brothers. Often, they sat in the evening together by the bank on the log, said nothing and listened to the water.

The years passed by and nobody counted them. Then, monks came by on a pilgrimage, followers of Gautama, the Buddha, who were asking to be ferried across the river. News had spread that the exalted one was sick and would soon die his last human death in order to become one with the salvation.

Often, Siddhartha thought of the dying wise man, the great teacher, whose voice had admonished nations and had awoken hundreds of thousands, whose voice he had also once heard, whose holy face he had also once seen with respect. Kindly, he thought of him, saw his path to perfection before his eyes and remembered with a smile the words the exalted one.

When so many went on a pilgrimage to the dying Buddha, Kamala also went to him, she who used to be the most beautiful of the courtesans. A long time ago, she had retired from her previous life, had given her garden to the monks of Gautama as a gift, had taken her refuge in the teachings and was among the friends and benefactors of the pilgrims.

Together with Siddhartha the boy, her son, she had gone on her way due to the news of the near death of Gautama in simple clothes, on foot. With her little son, she was travelling by the river; but the boy had soon grown tired, desired to go back home, wanted to rest, to eat, became disobedient and started whining.

# SIDDHARTHA

## LESSON 5

Kamala often had to take a rest with him as he was accustomed to having his way with her; she had to feed him, comfort him and scold him. He did not comprehend why he had to go on this exhausting and sad pilgrimage with his mother, to an unknown place, to a stranger, who was holy and about to die. So what if he died, how did this concern a little boy?

Later on Kamala had looked into Siddhartha's eyes and spoke with a heavy tongue, paralysed by the poison she had just eaten. "You've become old," she said, "you've become grey. But you are like the young Samana who at one time came without clothes, with dusty feet, to me in the garden. Siddhartha smiled, "I instantly recognised you, Kamala." Kamala pointed to her boy and said: "Did you recognise him as well? He is your son."

"She'll die," Siddhartha said quietly. Vasudeva nodded. Over his friendly face ran the light of the stove's fire. Once again, Kamala returned to consciousness. Pain distorted her face and Siddhartha's eyes read the suffering on her mouth and her pale cheeks.

Quietly, he read it, attentively, waiting, his mind becoming one with her suffering."

Looking at him, she said, "Now I see that your eyes have changed as well. They've become completely different. By what do I still recognise that you're Siddhartha? It's you, and it's not you." Siddhartha said nothing, quietly his eyes looked at hers. "You have achieved it?" she asked. "You have found peace." He smiled and placed his hand on hers.

When she died, Siddhartha understood that his son did not know him, that he could not love him like a father. Slowly, he also saw and understood that the eleven-year-old was a pampered boy, a mother's boy, and that he had grown up in the habits of rich people.

He was accustomed to fine food, to a soft bed, accustomed to giving orders to servants. Siddhartha understood that the mourning, pampered child could not suddenly and willingly be content with a life among strangers and in poverty. He did not force him, he did many a chore for him, always picked the best piece

of the meal for him. Slowly, he hoped to win him over, by friendly patience.

After some time, the boy ran away. And, after having been standing by the gate of the garden for a long time, Siddhartha realised that he could not help his son, that he was not allowed to cling to him. Deeply, he felt the love for the run-away in his heart, like a wound, and he felt at the same time that this wound had not been given to him in order to turn the knife, that it had to become a blossom and had to shine.

But neither one mentioned the boy's name nor spoke about him running away. Neither one spoke about the wound in his heart. In the hut, Siddhartha lay down on his bed and when after a while Vasudeva came to him to offer him a bowl of coconut milk, he found him asleep.

Slowly blossomed, slowly ripened in Siddhartha the realisation, the knowledge, what wisdom actually was, what the goal of his long search was. It was nothing but a readiness of the soul, an ability, a secret art, to think every moment and to be able to feel and inhale oneness.

# SIDDHARTHA

## LESSON 5

But the wound still burned, longingly and bitterly Siddhartha thought of his son, nurtured his love and tenderness in his heart, allowed the pain to gnaw at him, committed foolish acts of love. Not by itself this flame would go out.

Siddhartha listened. He was now nothing but a listener, completely empty. Often before, he had heard all this, these many voices in the river, but today it sounded new.

Already, he could no longer tell the many voices apart, not the happy ones from the weeping ones, not the ones of children from those of men. They all belonged together, the grieving for yearning, the scream of rage, everything was one, everything was intertwined and connected, entangled a thousand times. And everything together, all voices, all goals, all yearning, all suffering, all pleasure, all that was good and evil, all of this was the world.

All of it together was the flow of events, was the music of life. And when Siddhartha was listening attentively to this river, when he neither listened to the suffering nor the

laughter, when he did not tie his soul to any particular voice and submerged his self into it, he heard them all, perceived the whole, the oneness, the great song of the thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was Om: the perfection.

Not knowing any more whether time existed, whether the vision had lasted a second or a hundred years, not knowing any more whether there existed a Siddhartha, a Gautama, a me and a you, feeling in his innermost self as if he had been wounded by a divine arrow, the injury of which tasted sweet, being enchanted and dissolved in his innermost self.

Later that year Govinda came to meet him. He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha, instead he saw other faces, a long sequence, a flowing river of faces, of thousands, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously, all constantly changed and renewed, and all were still Siddhartha.

He realised that each one was to die a passionately painful confession of transitoriness, and yet none of them died,

each one only transformed, was always re-born, received evermore a new face, and all of these faces rested, flowed, generated themselves, floated along and merged with each other.

Perhaps Gautama, the Buddha, had seen this a thousand times and Govinda felt the most intimate love and the humblest veneration in his heart.

# SIDDHARTHA

## Q&A

**Question 1:** What was the ferryman's primary virtue and how did he suggest Siddhartha would learn?

**Question 5:** Under what circumstances did Siddhartha and Kamala meet again and who did she bring with her?

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

**Question 2:** How did business people and those on pilgrimages, view the river?

**Question 6:** What did Kamala mean when she recognised was Siddhartha but it was not Siddhartha?

**Question 3:** How would you explain why Siddhartha came to realise the river is everywhere at once?

**Question 7:** His son was a pampered child. Why could he not willingly be content with his father's life?

**Question 4:** Why did time need to be overcome and put needed to be defeated?

**Question 8:** What did he mean by the divine arrow being dissolved in his innermost self?