As a human being, one might, at some point, find oneself wont for a deeper meaning, an overarching purpose to existence. It’s all too easy to get swept up in the mundane rigamarole of daily life and to feel as though one is caught on an automatic conveyor belt from the maternity ward to the crematorium with very few detours along the way. Add to this the tendency for the human mind to regret the past and worry about the future and life can be cast in a rather bleak light. So, what’s to be done about this feeling? Is there a way to spin this outlook into something more tenable or even something that could evoke joy? Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* explores this topic in depth, using Siddhartha’s life to illustrate one young man’s journey for freedom from the self.

Siddhartha’s struggle is one of paradoxes. Even as a young person, he is bereft with the feeling that, despite his prowess as a Brahmin, he still feels the need to seek satisfaction elsewhere. Hesse says of Siddhartha, “He lived a good life, his words were wise; fine and noble thoughts dwelt in his head – but even as he who knew so much, did he live in bliss, was he at peace? Was he not also a seeker, insatiable?” (Hesse. 7) The realization of the underlying dichotomy that plagues Siddhartha ultimately leads him to forego his comfortable life and to lean into his seeking.

He chooses to leave the village and to join a group of nomadic Samanas in hopes that he will be able to free himself of the prison of desire and to find enlightenment through negation. He spends a handful of years living in self-denial, going to great lengths to starve the self of its desires in order to liberate himself from them. He sees the world of illusions in everything around him, from businessmen to decaying animals on the riverside and as he fasts he develops a fervent contempt for the game of life. “Siddhartha had one single goal – to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow – to let the Self die.” (Hesse. 14)

However, though his practice as a Samana taught him many ways to empty the self, no matter how hard he tried, all paths seemed to lead back to the self. This epiphany brings about the next major paradox in Siddhartha’s journey. He asks of his friend Govinda, “What is meditation? What is abandonment of the body? What is fasting? What is holding of the breath? It is a flight from the Self, it is a temporary escape from the torment of Self.” (Hesse. 17)With this realization, Siddhartha outgrows the Samanas. The knowledge they seemed to possess when he joined the group has transformed into another flavor of the illusion of the Self that he is seeking to escape. He continues to Govinda, “I believe that amongst the Samanas, probably not even one will attain Nirvana. We find consolations, we learn tricks with which we deceive ourselves, but the essential thing – the way – we do not find.” (Hesse. 18)

Siddhartha and Govinda hear rumors about a man named Gotama who is told to have achieved enlightenment by “conquering in himself the sorrows of the world and had brought to a standstill the cycle of rebirth.” (Hesse. 20) Siddhartha abandons the Samanas and decides to search for Gotama in order to attain this knowledge for himself. Upon seeing Gotama for the first time, Siddhartha recognizes him immediately as the Buddha and points him out to Govinda from a distance. “With a secret smile, not unlike that of a healthy child, he walked along, peacefully, quietly…every finger of his hand spoke of peace, spoke of completeness, sought nothing, imitated nothing, reflected a continuous quiet, an unfading light, an invulnerable peace” (Hesse. 27-28). Despite Siddhartha’s own desire for such unwavering inner peace, he quickly realizes that the Buddha has nothing to teach him. After all, it isn’t knowledge, but rather the experience of freedom of the self that Siddhartha is seeking.

This transition triggers the next phase of Siddhartha’s life. Having left home to seek knowledge, he has now given up the idea of seeking knowledge entirely. The external world, which he once cast aside as a nothing but ornate and temptuous illusions, is now abuzz with information that cannot be learned, but can only be experienced. He is awakened to the beauty of the physical world that he had so long tried to deny himself. This new revelation throws Siddhartha headlong into paradox when he meets the lovely Kamala, for whom he is immediately smitten. While Siddhartha started his journey in order to free himself of desire, he has found himself with a fervent desire to play into Samsara, the game of ordinary human life.

Siddhartha is becomes very successful at the game, but as his wealth and prosperity grow, so too does his dissatisfaction to the point where he considers suicide in order to escape the gluttony and greed which have replaced his curiosity and wonderment. About this time in Siddhartha’s life, New York Times contributor, Adam Kirsch says, “Siddhartha refers to the normal human beings around him as “the child people”—and full of self-contempt. No wonder he is much given to thoughts of suicide, whether or not he actually commits it.” (Kirsch). It would seem that Siddhartha’s background in spiritual learning has actually been the most prominent obstacle in his quest for inner peace.

Rather than commit suicide, Siddhartha, abandoning his material possessions and life in the city, experiences a more metaphorical death. “His was full of ennui, full of misery, full of death; there was nothing left in the world that could attract him, that could bring him pleasure or solace.” (Hesse. 87) With this feeling, Siddhartha collapses beside a tree and falls asleep, wishing for death to free him from his suffering. It is in this moment that he recalls the spiritual learning from his youth and “when the sound of Om reached Siddhartha’s ears, his slumbering soul suddenly awakened and he recognized the folly in his actions.” (Hesse. 89)

Siddhartha returns to a river he crossed many years ago in order to reunite with the ferryman, Vasudeva, who was kind enough to let him stay in his riverside cabin just after he had parted ways with Govinda and Gotama. He joins the ferryman as his apprentice and spends his time listening intently to the sounds of the river in which he hears the voices of everyone he has ever known. He discovers that “when he did not bind his soul to any one in particular and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om – perfection.” (Hesse. 136) It is in this singular word that Siddhartha, despite all of his personal suffering, finally attains the peace he has been seeking his entire life. He realizes the underlying truth of reality, that everything is united, everything is a continuum of which the individual makes only a part. He discovers that the self he had been looking to diminish was the “self” with a lowercase “s” and once he was able to step out of his own way, the “Self” with an uppercase “S”, the eternal song of the river, the pure liberation of Nirvana, was with him the whole time.

Columnist Paul W. Morris claims “*Siddhartha* addresses a perennial unrest and provides a new set of values for a generation of young people disenchanted with their parents’ conservatism,” (Morris) but to diminish the potency of the story by attributing it to some kind of rebellious fugue of youth overshadows the deeper meaning to which Siddhartha’s experiences can expose the reader. It’s easy for most people to empathize with Siddharta’s stuggles and while the author’s use of “Sanskrit words such as ‘Brahmin,’ ‘Samana,’ and “Atman’' make[s] the story more immersive and help[s] to remind the reader of the story’s setting [and] most western readers … [won’t be] familiar with these words and [will] have to rely on the context to decipher the meanings,” (Wilber) Hesse opens innumerable opportunities for readers to further explore these topics. Siddhartha’s life shines a spotlight on the nature of human suffering and provides the succinct and powerful symbolism that is required to spark the spontaneous realization of joy that is necessary to find fulfillment in life.

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