

# Siddhartha

Hermann Hesse (MJF Books, New York, 1951)

Have you noticed how when you are on the trail of something, when a theme is running through your head, heart or soul, you run into reminders and pieces of it at unexpected times and places?

Yesterday, Friday November 21, 2003, I was in a bookstore with my six-year-old granddaughter who was attempting to rush me out of the store since she had picked out her book. As we walked to the front of the store with me complaining that I hadn't yet seen anything I wanted she pointed at a bargain-book display by the checkouts and said with some exasperation in her voice: "Look, grandpa, here are lots of books, just get one!" I looked where she pointed, and voila! There lay Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*!

Today, I read it all, in a mall, waiting for my wife to shop, and I cried inwardly in several places. I was really touched by this story of a young man who seeks enlightenment, salvation, by many paths. Does he finally obtain it? I won't spoil the book for you by telling you the whole story, but from the excerpts I am about to share the answer will seem more obvious than it really is.

Imagine my surprise and delight, having just this morning written about Dionysius the Areopagite, to find very similar concepts and thoughts into this book by Hesse. *Siddhartha* is a contemporary of the Buddha, and meets and converses with him. Hesse is an admirer of Eastern religious thought. This is not to suggest he was a stranger to his own Western traditions, even its mystical traditions, of course. But how interesting to come into a book that echoes some key aspects of the teachings of Marguerite Porete and

other students of Pseudo-Dionysius!

I will focus only the intellect/intuition issues in these excerpts. Marguerite Porete impressed upon the readers of her book that if they approached it only using their intellect, they would not understand it. But if intellect would allow faith and love to be mistresses of the house of the soul, they would understand it.

So I perked up and paid attention when the young Siddhartha tells his best friend Govinda (p. 15):

I have spent a long time and have not yet finished, in order to learn this, Govinda: that one can learn nothing. There is, so I believe, in the essence of everything, something that we cannot call learning. There is, my friend, only a knowledge—that is everywhere, that is Atman, that is in me and you and in every creature, and I am beginning to believe that this knowledge has no worse enemy than the man of knowledge, than learning.

And it is not just Porete who is echoed here, Eckhart's notions also reverberate in these words.

But Siddhartha continues to grow and gain insight. At one point he surprised himself and told the Buddha things he really had not consciously known (p. 39) but was, he felt, to come to him from experiences still ahead of him:

What he had said to the Buddha—that the Buddha's wisdom and secret was not teachable, that it was inexpressible and communicable—and which he [the Buddha] had once experienced in an hour of enlightenment, was just what he

[Siddhartha] had now set off to experience, what he was now beginning to experience. He must gain experience himself. He had known for a long time that his Self was Atman, of the same eternal nature as Brahman, but he had never really found his Self, because he had wanted to trap it in the net of thoughts. The body was certainly not the Self, nor the play of senses, nor thought, nor understanding, nor acquired wisdom or art with which to draw conclusions and from already existing thoughts to spin new thoughts. . . . Both thought and the senses were fine things, behind both of them lay hidden the last meaning; it was worth while listening to them both, to play with both, neither to despise nor overrate either of them, but to listen intently to both voices.

Siddhartha returns to this theme after undergoing many extreme experiences. On page 80 he observes concerning his learning the folly of pursuing worldly wealth and pleasure:

I have known it for a long time, but I have only just experienced it. Now I know it not only with my intellect, but with my eyes, with my heart, with my stomach. . . .

On the fold between pages 80 and 81 is this further declaration regarding his vain quest to come to know his Self:

Too much knowledge had hindered him; too many holy verses, too many sacrificial rites, too much mortification of the flesh, too much doing and striving. He had been full of arrogance; he had always been the cleverest, the most eager—always a step ahead of the others, always the priest or the sage. His Self had crawled into this priesthood, into this arrogance, into this intellectuality. It sat there tightly and

grew, while he thought he was destroying it with fasting and penance. Now he understood it and realized that the inward voice had been right, that no teacher could have brought him salvation. That is why he had to go into the world, to lose himself . . . .

Siddhartha had to learn to stop the striving and to start listening (p. 87):

Above all, he learned from it how to listen, to listen with a still heart, with a waiting, open soul, without passion, without desire, without judgment, without opinions.

He had told the Buddha that he could not accept his teachings even though they were the most perfect he had heard. But this did not mean he and Gautama, the Buddha, were not one (p. 90):

For a long time he knew that he was not separated from Gautama, although he could not accept his teachings. No, a true seeker could not accept any teachings, not if he sincerely wished to find something. But he who had found, could give his approval to every path, every goal; nothing separated him from all the other thousands who lived in eternity, who breathed the Divine.

Continuing this theme of what is to be "found" by the seeker, Siddhartha observed (p. 106):

Within Siddhartha there slowly grew and ripened the knowledge of what wisdom really was and the goal of his long seeking. It was nothing but a preparation of the soul, a capacity, a secret art of thinking, feeling and breathing

thoughts of unity at every moment of life.

At a later point in his life, Siddhartha finds unity, the goal that was so elusive for so long (p. 111):

From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflict of desire, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things.

The final chapter of the book has Siddhartha explaining his life journey to his best friend, again. In somewhat different words he recapitulates a lot of what has been cited above. On pages 114 and 115 there is a discussion that parallels, to me, what was also taught by some of the more radical Western, Christian mystics of the High Middle Ages. Doctrines and beliefs and knowledge have little to do with the goodness of the life you live. Wisdom supports living a good life, and:

Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish.

A final set of observations by Siddhartha lies in pages 118 and 119 where he instructs his best friend in the idea that teachings are not to be revered and loved, but things are:

. . . teachings are of no use to me; they have no hardness, no softness, nor colors, no corners, no smell, no taste—they have nothing but words. Perhaps that is what prevents you from

finding peace, perhaps there are too many words, for even salvation and virtue, Samsara and Nirvana are only words.

. . .

It seems to me . . . that love is the most important thing in the world. It may be important to great thinkers to examine the world, to explain and despise it. But I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all things with love, admiration and respect.

Were there "teachings" in the bok that left me a little unconvinced, even cold? Sure, just as was the case with Siddhartha and the Buddha, he respected, admired, even loved the man but could not accept all he said. He acknowledged, for example, that all may be illusion, but these were mere words. The Buddha lived a full life and loved people and devoted his life to raising the up. Yet these people, and even he, were illusion. I liked that. When Siddhartha came to this realization, that his former severe asceticism had made him feel superior to people and loathe the word, he experienced the world and all in it in a different way. After this realization he became engaged in life and what it had to offer, and loved every being, respected his fellow humans, and loved every thing in- and every particle of the world.

But where he talked of time being circular I saw it as a "teaching," and where he talked of the perfection of all that is, as it is in the eternal 'now' I had my itty bitty objections to these teachings assume a defensive posture. Why? Because it allows a more callous attitude toward, and acceptance of, human suffering.

While I am on that subject, as I was reading this book Friday, in a park where my granddaughter was doing monkey bars and riding

her scooter, I struck up a conversation with a lady whose little boy was also having a good time there, and got into a discussion of Abraham after we exchanged names. Galiana was hers, I had no story at the ready for that one! Will she ever bring her child to play there again? I don't know.

She tried to justify Abraham's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael by saying that this is exactly what she and her little boy needed to birth them into their roles. This is very similar to what Siddhartha concludes, that good and evil are all one in the timeless reality, that even the suffering of the moment is good since it co-exists with the birth of strength and newness that will come from it. So I gave her a piece of my mind and said that in this day and age Abraham would be locked up for attempted murder and reckless endangerment, and would be locked up in a nuthouse for trying to sacrifice his son in response to a voice in his head. And that is how it should be.

She disagreed and said that just as helping a butterfly in its seriously difficult struggle to get out of its cocoon kills it, so it was that these two had to learn through these extreme circumstances to fly on different resources than they had heretofore relied on. In other words it was an allegory, not history. I disagreed, but as I later finished writing about Dionysius I realized that in her heart, without knowing it, this woman was a Victorine! She would have been at home in the Abbey of St. Victor where they taught that the Bible was allegory way back in the Middle Ages. She rejected my superficial teachings, I rejected hers, on the spot. But now that I cogitate on it a while, and given the Victorine idea of scripture stories as allegories, OK, maybe she has a point. A very good point.

And that is how it goes with "teachings." You are free to accept and reject. You are also free to cogitate and come to appreciate. And you are free to change your mind. Reality is not changed one whit, but your perception of it may be.

This is a fine place to leave what I found to be a deeply stirring and profoundly engaging book.