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A Unique Path: Comparing *Siddhartha* to Buddhist philosophy

Published in 1922, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* reflects a theme prevalent in many of Hesse's novels, that of a person on a journey. In the case of *Siddhartha*, Hesse takes his title character through many different experiences on the way to finding peace. In the midst of his journey, Siddhartha meets Gotama Buddha, listens to his teachings, converses with the great teacher himself, and ultimately rejects his philosophy for the purpose, as Siddhartha relates to Gotama, of "reach[ing] my goal alone" (34). Siddhartha appears to seek his own path, yet in the end, as he reaches his goal and finds peace, one may still ask whether he has truly found a unique path. Perhaps, falsely proud and delusional, he has actually turned back to Buddhist teachings. Indeed, some critical analysts of Hesse's *Siddhartha* maintain that he reaches a predominantly Buddhist philosophy, while others argue that Siddhartha almost completely rejects Buddhism. However, Siddhartha's path is indeed unique, neither completely following nor discarding Buddhist belief. He diverges from Buddha in the way that he views the world and man's response to it, yet they agree that the path to peace is through embracing the reality of the world. Thus, Siddhartha creates a path that is wholly his own and not dependent on Buddha's teachings.

First, Buddha and Siddhartha have different ideas as to what is wrong with the world. The Four Noble Truths express the foundational beliefs of Buddhism, particularly the nature of reality. The first two state the problem with the world, as Carol Anderson in her article on the

Four Noble Truths summarizes, “In short, all life is suffering . . . [and] suffering arises because of craving, desire, and attachment” (Anderson 296). In other words, the predicament that mankind faces, which unfortunately arises from the natural human characteristic of desire, is that all aspects of the present life involve suffering, implying that suffering is bad and something from which humans want to be free. At the same time, Buddha affirms that life is inherently this way, that suffering is the natural and unavoidable reality of existence. In fact, the basic idea of ‘cause and effect’ is stated by Buddhism to be a source of suffering. This idea, termed ‘Dependent Origination’ is explained by Mathieu Boisvert, “The theory of dependent origination is usually divided into twelve links (*nidāna*), each of which conditions the following link . . . The chain of dependent origination is often approached as causal theory . . . this complex chain of causation is always said to give rise to suffering” (669). In other words, simply the natural chain of cause and effect perpetrates suffering, thus confirming that suffering is an innate part of life. Therefore, according to Buddhism, mankind’s very existence is based in suffering.

On the other hand, Siddhartha views the world as being perfectly good. In attempting to relate to Govinda what he has discovered, he affirms, “Time is not real . . . [and thus] the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion . . . Therefore, it seems to me that everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness” (Hesse 143–144). Siddhartha explains that because time is not real, the apparent division between good and holiness as opposed to evil and sin is eradicated. Thus, the nature of the world is good and there is nothing wrong with it. Suffering is not undesirable, because it is good; in fact, it is not even suffering, for it is the same as bliss. In the same way, people are themselves perfect. Therefore, Siddhartha expresses his belief that there is no predicament facing mankind, no problem requiring a solution. However, the

characters of Kamala, Govinda, and especially Siddhartha himself would seem to prove otherwise. For they all seem to seek something, implying that either they or their surroundings are imperfect. Indeed, on her deathbed, Kamala asks Siddhartha, ““Have you found peace? . . . Yes, . . . I see it. I also will find peace” (Hesse 113). In a sense, it is true that the characters seek to be at peace, yet as Siddhartha shows, without the illusion of time all ‘imperfections’ vanish. However, within the constraints of time, in which unfortunately the reader is also bound, a person may appear to be imperfect, lacking peace. Yet, in reality, without time, the world and those in it are in fact at peace and perfect. Therefore, Siddhartha’s worldview stands in stark contrast to Buddhism, which sees the world as innately bad because it is filled with suffering. In the way that each philosophy views the nature of the world, they are at odds, differing over whether the world is good or bad.

Not only do Siddhartha and Buddha hold divergent views on the nature of the world, they also do not agree on the goal of mankind. The last of the Buddhist Noble Truths relate the way in which a person can avoid the suffering that life contains, demonstrating that the goal of a person’s life is to find a state that is free from suffering, typically referred to as Nirvāṇa. As Anderson explains, “[Buddha] attained the state in which there is no death or suffering (that is, the state of nirvāṇa) . . . [which is] the ultimate goal of the Buddha’s teachings” (296–297). Nirvāṇa, then, is the solution to unavoidable and undesirable suffering by escaping what is inherent in the world. Thus, it is an ‘other’ state beyond the world, towards which a Buddhist strives and the Buddha’s teachings lead.

On the other hand, Siddhartha believes that there is no goal for a person to endeavor towards. As he explains, “the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion” (Hesse 143). Because

Siddhartha believes that the world is completely good, it follows that there is no better state to reach. Similarly, in the absence of time, there is no division between this world and any type of ‘Nirvāṇa’; therefore, there is no ‘other’ state to attain. In other words, there is no goal to strive for, because there is nothing other than or better than the world as it is. In the same way, since suffering is the same as bliss, there is nothing to be avoided. Therefore, the contrast between Buddhism and Siddhartha’s philosophy is plain. Buddha states that the goal of mankind is to avoid what is inherent in this life and escape to a state beyond the world, while Siddhartha believes that this life is completely good and thus there is no goal to attain. Lewis W. Tusken, in his literary criticism of Hesse’s *Siddhartha* articulates this conflict, “Hesse cannot believe in *Nirvana* if it means separation from the suffering of life. His God incorporates and blesses the earthly life as well as the spiritual.” In other words, the idea of Nirvāṇa implies that the world is not good because people have a goal outside of it. On the other hand, Hesse believes that the world is inherently good and is of value on its own. Therefore, in regard to the goal of man, Buddha’s and Siddhartha’s philosophy clearly differ. However, one must also remember that though Siddhartha’s beliefs are true given the illusion of time, there still is a sense that within the confines of time there is a goal to reach—peace with the world.

Furthermore, Buddhism and Siddhartha’s beliefs are shown to be different in the way in which they seek to accomplish their goals of rectifying the problem with the world. The last of the Noble Truths shows how to reach the goal of Nirvāṇa, as Anderson states, “To stop suffering, one must stop desiring. The Buddha taught the fourth truth . . . the path that has eight parts, as the means to end suffering . . . The eight limbs of the path consist of: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration” (296–297). In other words, the ending of suffering comes from the complete

termination of one's desires; the way leading to that cessation of suffering is the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of doing particular things and abstaining from others. Thus, Buddhism prescribes a way of life to strive to fulfill so that one will become the type of person who attains Nirvāṇa.

In contrast, Siddhartha, consistent with his belief that all of life is good, explains that one does not need to become a particular person nor follow a particular path. He relates to Govinda, “someday the sinner will . . . attain Nirvana, will someday become a Buddha. Now this ‘someday’ is illusion; it is only a comparison. The sinner is not on the way to a Buddha-like state; he is not evolving, although our thinking cannot conceive things otherwise. No, the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner; his future is already there” (Hesse 143–144). Thus, since time is only an illusion, the Buddha-like nature that a person will ‘later’ attain is actually in the present; it happens now. In other words, one is perfect now and there is no personal change or transformation that needs to occur. Furthermore, Siddhartha explains that without the illusion of time, there is no sin or evil and thus no action to avoid, for all is good. As he says, “everything that exists is good . . . sin as well as holiness” (Hesse 144). A person is not constrained to a particular set of guidelines to follow for his life because there is no distinction between sin and goodness. Thus, the difference between Siddhartha and Buddha lies in that Buddha mandates a particular way to adhere to and a particular person one must become to reach Nirvāṇa, while Siddhartha states that one is already perfect now, with no need to change or avoid anything. As Theodore Ziolkowski, a prominent scholar in Hesse literature, writes, “it is the whole meaning of the book that Siddhartha can attain Buddha's goal without following his path.” In essence, Hesse believes that there is no particular path, yet Siddhartha can still reach peace.

On the other hand, Siddhartha and Buddha agree in the basic element of the way to reach the goal. In Buddhism, it is important to note that though the Eightfold Path leads to Nirvāṇa, it is only part of the Four Noble Truths, which together lead to enlightenment. This is illustrated in Anderson's article when she relates the background of Buddha's enlightenment: "During the first watch, he became aware of each of the four truths; during the second watch, he realized that he had to fully know the truth of each of the four truths; and during the third watch, he knew that he had, in fact, realized just how each truth was true. With that, he knew that he had reached bodhi (awakening) . . . and had experienced Nirvāṇa" (295). Buddha recognizes the truth of the nature of the world and of man, including the essence of life, why it is that way, and how it can be overcome. It is with this realization of the nature of reality as well as a complete experiencing and embracing of that truth that Buddha became enlightened, attaining Nirvāṇa.

Similarly, Siddhartha must love and accept the world as it is to attain peace. As was mentioned previously, though in reality there is no goal to aim for, within the illusion of time Siddhartha and other characters in the novel seek to be at peace with the world. The way to gain that peace is to perceive the world and themselves as the perfection that they really are. Siddhartha explains, "everything that exists is good . . . Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me" (Hesse 144). In other words, in response to the innate goodness of the world, one needs only to understand, embrace, accept, and love the world as it is. In this way, a person will find peace. However, Colin Butler illustrates an interesting connection between this solution and Siddhartha's problem, "Predictably, [in] Siddhartha's eventual solution . . . *the way of understanding reality will also turn out to be the most satisfying.*" Thus, Siddhartha states that to fulfill one's desire to be at peace, one must realize that one is always at peace, and that one

never needed to seek to be at peace to begin with. In accepting and loving the world as it is, Siddhartha finds his 'goal' fulfilled. This actually is very similar to Buddha's teachings, for he also states that one must experience and embrace the truth of the nature of the world to find enlightenment. Both Siddhartha and Buddha find it of greatest import to see the reality of the world and to fully absorb, realize, and experience its truth.

Therefore, Siddhartha's path is indeed unique, for it shares both an important similarity with Buddhist philosophy and unavoidable differences. In brief, the similarity lies in that they each affirm the importance of viewing the world in a particular way in order to reach peace or enlightenment, but the differences are in the way that each philosophy defines the world and the response man should have to it. First, Buddha states that the world is inherently bad, for it contains unavoidable suffering, while Siddhartha says that the world and the people in it are perfectly good because time is not a real entity to separate good from bad. However, within time, one may still feel imperfect, lacking peace. Secondly, though Buddha believes that Nirvāṇa, escape from the world of suffering, is man's ultimate goal, Siddhartha emphasizes that there is no goal, for the present world is good and there is nothing else to attain. Third, Buddha's philosophy that one must follow the Eightfold Path—becoming a better person and avoiding certain things—to attain Nirvāṇa is in conflict with Siddhartha's belief that a person is already perfect and all actions themselves are good, so that one needs not change or be constrained to do certain things. Lastly, Buddha reached enlightenment when he fully realized the truth of the Four Noble Truths, which is similar to Siddhartha's statement that to reach peace, one must embrace and love the world as the complete goodness that it is. In other words, they each stress the importance of embracing the reality of the world. Therefore, as Siddhartha's way to peace

contains a similarity to Buddhism, yet incorporates concepts in contradiction to Buddhist philosophy, it is indeed his own unique path.

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