

Enlightenment on the river



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Hundreds of Buddhist monks try to attain Nirvana daily. They all follow the teachings of Gotama Buddha, but most fail to reach their goal and end up being reborn as new creatures. In Hermann Hesse's book, *Siddhartha*, a young boy, Siddhartha, rejects the teachings of Gotama Buddha and follows his own path to enlightenment. His location of enlightenment, in a departure from the Buddha's tree, is a river. In the book, Hesse uses the river as a key catalyst to lead Siddhartha to Nirvana. The river acts as an archetype for timelessness, as a transition between phases of life, and as a teacher.

The archetype of timelessness is one of the most obvious motifs that surrounds the river. The river shows timelessness for the first time when Siddhartha notices how it only has an illusion of movement. He sees "that the water continually flowed and flowed and yet it was always there; it was always the same and yet every moment it was new" (Hesse 83). He realizes that both the river and time move in a questionable fashion. Just as the river seems to be continuously moving but remains in one place, time also seems to be moving but remains in one place. The river shows its archetype of timelessness when Siddhartha is listening to its voices. While Siddhartha listens to the river, he hears the "song of a thousand voices," but "when he did not listen to the sorrow or laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice 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" (111). When Siddhartha focused on one aspect of the river, he did not feel anything. However, when he let all the opposites form together, he found perfection. When all the voices are separate, this phenomenon represents time, since there can only be one voice at a time,

but when the voices combine, they exhibit timelessness. This realization of timelessness brings Siddhartha to enlightenment. Towards the end, we see that Siddhartha ingrained the idea of timelessness into himself when Govinda looks at Siddhartha and “ no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces — hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha” (121). Siddhartha has become so full of timelessness that his past, present, and future all appear on his face at once. He has transcended time. This is one of the main ideas that eventually leads him to enlightenment. Overall, the use of the river to symbolize the archetype of timelessness is a key part of Siddhartha’s enlightenment process, even though he only learns this in his last stage of his life.

The river is also very important to Siddhartha’s transition between phases of life, which allows him to have experiences that help lead him to enlightenment. The first phase change is when Siddhartha switches from a life of spirituality to one of sensations. He reflects on the first time he crossed the river, when he “ reached the long river in the wood, the same river across which a ferryman had once taken him when he was a still a young man and had come from Gotama’s town” (71). He was coming from Gotama Buddha’s “ town,” which was a spiritual place, and he was heading off to start a new life in the city, one of physical pleasure. This was his first change in life phases, from spiritual to physical. Later, when he is returning from the city, he reaches the river and contemplates suicide. The river then

makes him fall asleep and purifies him with the word Om. When he wakes up from his slumber, “ The past now seemed to him to be covered by a veil, extremely remote, very unimportant. He only knew that his previous life... was finished” (73). He has awakened as a new person. This is his second change in life phases, from a life of physical pleasure, to a life of spiritual awakening. Both of these phases were necessary for Siddhartha to experience to reach enlightenment. Towards the end he returns to his previous phase in life when he tells Govinda, “ I learned through my body and soul that it was necessary for me to sin, that I needed lust, that I had to strive for property and experience nausea and the depth of despair in order to learn to resist them, in order to learn to love the world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary vision of perfection, but to leave it as it is, to love it and be glad to belong to it” (116). Although in theory his time in the city may have been a waste of time, in reality, he needed the experience to reach enlightenment. And although he could have experienced the life in the city on his own, if the river had not purified him, he would have committed suicide. The river leads Siddhartha to enlightenment by letting Siddhartha fill himself with sin and then purifying him afterwards.

Yet the river’s most important role in the book is its activity as Siddhartha’s teacher, the main reason he reaches enlightenment. After the river purifies Siddhartha, he accepts it as his guide. He recounts that “ It seemed to him as if the river had something special to tell him, something which he did not know, something which still awaited him. Siddhartha had wanted to drown himself in this river; the old, tired, despairing Siddhartha was today drowned

in it. The new Siddhartha felt a deep love for this flowing water and decided that he would not leave it again so quickly” (81). With this, he accepts his last teacher, the river. He feels that it has wisdom that it can teach him, something no other teacher was able to do. This is very special since his whole life Siddhartha had avoided teachers. He never felt that they could teach him something new. However, in the end, Siddhartha does learn from the river. “ The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it, too. The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it. You have already learned from the river that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, seek depths...You have also learned this from the river. You will learn other things, too” (86), Vasudeva tells Siddhartha after he takes him as an apprentice. As the book continues this statement holds true. Siddhartha learns how to listen, wait, and remain taciturn. Altogether, these teachings allow him to reach Nirvana. As Siddhartha is talking to Govinda, Siddhartha tells him, “ There was a man at this ferry who was my predecessor and teacher. He was a holy man who for many years believed in the river and nothing else. He noticed that the river’s voice spoke to him. He learned from it; it educated and taught him. The river seemed like a god to him and for many years he did not know that every wind, every cloud, every bird, every beetle is equally divine and knows and can teach just as well as the esteemed river. But when this holy man went off into the woods, he knew everything; he knew more than you and I, without teachers, without books, just because he believed in the river” (118). Vasudeva believes in the river to the extent that he can learn all the wisdom of life from it. Siddhartha learns how to do this as well, and just as the river helps Vasudeva reach enlightenment, so to it helps Siddhartha reach enlightenment of his own. Siddhartha later says, “ I know I

am at one with Gotama” (119), meaning that just as Gotama had reached enlightenment, so to he, Siddhartha, had also reached it. The wisdom the river gives over to Siddhartha is the key to his enlightenment.

For Hesse’s protagonist, the river plays an extremely large role in the quest for enlightenment. The river embodies the archetype of timelessness, the transition between life phases, and the role of a teacher. Altogether, one can learn many lessons from Siddhartha’s story. Perhaps following a very popular belief system may not be the best way to reach enlightenment. It may be best to listen to a river, instead of even the great Gotama Buddha.

Works Cited:

Hesse, Hermann. Siddhartha. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New York: New Directions, 1951.