

Thomas Merton and *Siddhartha*

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Thomas Merton entered in his journal on October 15, 1968, the following commentary: 'And I finished Hesse's *Siddhartha*'.¹ It is noted that this novel is the only one of the three Hermann Hesse novels read by Merton that is without commentary and quotations.² It is my surmise that *Siddhartha* is the Hesse novel about which Merton was most likely to comment, cryptically or otherwise, and I am sure that Merton would have had some observations about *Siddhartha* had

he revised his notes upon arriving back at Gethsemani after his trip to the Far East.³ Of the three Hermann Hesse novels Merton read during his journey, *Siddhartha* is the only one in which the protagonist achieves total self-realization. Before I share my thoughts about the novel and Merton's probable insights based on an educated conjecture, I will place it into the context of Hesse's writings and commentaries. My methodology will be to present three themes from *Siddhar-*

tha that resonate with Thomas Merton and his writings.

The word, Siddhartha, from the Sanskrit, literally means 'he who has attained his aim'.⁴ *Siddhartha* represents two ideals based on 'diametrically opposed philosophies of life'. It is really a tale of two Buddhas; the Gotama Buddha representing an Eastern ideal as, in contrast to a Western ideal symbolised by Siddhartha, Hesse's concept of a 'Western possibility'.⁵ Even though Hesse was repelled early on by institutional Protestant Pietism⁶ his mysticism was born of this belief, informed by the philosophers of the German Romantic Age and German mystics of the Middle Ages. His mysticism embraced the idea of 'Oneness with God, the All' which was realized through contemplation and meditation. However, Hesse's Western mysticism still had remnants of Indian influences, brought about by his family ties to India and evidenced by his reading of the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads.⁷ Hesse's belief in Oneness - his ideal of self-realization, is Western as well as Eastern and he wrote a review in 1912 of the Bhagavad-Gita in which he extolled the concept of Oneness.⁸ The doctrine of Oneness parallels Hesse's deeply held conviction that the Kingdom Of God is within you. In fact 'one of Hesse's favorite biblical quotations was Christ's remark, "Das Himmelreich ist inwendig in Euch" (The Kingdom of God is within you)'.⁹ The doctrine of Oneness was one of

four determinants in Hesse's life, according to German theologian Hans Kung. The other three included aspects of Pietism, 'German Romanticism's devout awe of nature', and psychoanalysis. Kung observed that Siddhartha integrated Oneness with a 'Chinese affirmative attitude to life (Taoism's acceptance of life's polarities), topped off by a Christian note of love and service (Pietistic Protestantism).' Kung further believed that Hesse and his belief in Oneness should be embraced by Christianity, which would enhance the cause of ecumenism.¹⁰

Much of *Siddhartha*, according to Hussain Kassim, is an effort by Hesse to develop the novel according to Mahayana Buddhism.¹¹ Hesse scholar, Joseph Mileck, contests this position, stating, 'That much in *Siddhartha* is in accord with Mahayana Buddhism is beyond dispute. However, this is sheer coincidence When Hesse wrote *Siddhartha*, he knew only the older more severe Pali or Hinayana Buddhism, and upon that he turned his back in no uncertain manner'.¹² Hesse was never a Buddhist, as it reminded him of his family's religion of Pietism with its asceticism, restrictions, metaphysics and dogma. Buddha, as a person, was admired by Hesse but, 'Buddha was a companion, never a sole consolation, and only briefly, not for years'.¹³ Thomas Merton, of course, had developed his early Buddhist thinking along the Mahayana tradition or

the 'Middle Way' and more than likely read *Siddhartha* through this lens. Certainly, to better understand the Indian setting of *Siddhartha*, a rudimentary knowledge of terminology related to Hinduism and Buddhism can be helpful. However, one has to be careful not to be distracted by the setting as it could be misleading. Hesse was not trying to extol Indian religions at the expense of Christianity, but rather, he was trying to come to grips with himself and with life. Coming to grips with himself or the achievement of self-realization was not a new venture for Hesse in his life as a novelist but *Siddhartha* represents the culmination of his attempts after several novels, beginning with *Demian*. Mileck asserts that:

What had become a passionate ideal (self-realization) for Hesse finally received its full expression in *Siddhartha*. Of all his protagonists (in other novels), Siddhartha alone fully realizes this ideal: he lives himself, learns thereby to know himself, and ultimately experiences self-realization. It is of this long-evolving possibility and not of a renewed personal interest in India that *Siddhartha* is a culmination. India and Buddha were guise and foil and not substance and ideal.¹⁴

A brief chronology of the writing

of *Siddhartha* reveals that Hesse, before 1900, was influenced by his family ties to India which lead later, in the early 1900s, to his reading of the Buddhistic scriptures, the Bhagavad-Gita, Upanishads – all of which was part of Hesse's search for a 'confirmation of his own still-vague philosophical presentiments'.¹⁵ Although the concept of Oneness behind the Indian religions was attractive to Hesse, his disenchantment which was with Indian religiosity – albeit its accentuated Oneness – was a result of its similarity to Pietism, which stressed a puritanical asceticism, with an overlay of scholasticism, clearly repugnant to the German novelist. What Hesse was seeking was ultimately to be found in China, not India, and through his father's influence the novelist was introduced to the writings of Lao-Tse in 1907. The fruits and effects of this introduction to Chinese thought is articulated by Mileck: 'India's asceticism repelled Hesse; China's wisdom was a confirmation of himself and all he aspired to.'¹⁶ Hesse was persuaded to write *Siddhartha* not because of any disinclination for Chinese thought but rather a fascination with Gotama Buddha the man, as opposed to Buddhism as an institutional religion. To Hesse, Buddha was an historical figure on the same plane with Christ and Socrates, 'a man to be emulated'.¹⁷ Although Hesse remained indebted to Western Christianity and its linkage to the medie-

val mystics, he was convinced that Western man should 'cultivate the Oriental art of meditation. The oneness, timelessness, and meaningfulness of life were most readily accessible in this mode of thought, too long neglected in the West'.¹⁸

Hermann Hesse began his tale of ultimate self-realization, *Siddhartha*, in late February 1920 and there was satisfactory progress until the end of July, but true to his nature as a confessional autobiographical novelist, he had to cease writing it because he had not yet experienced the final stage of Siddhartha's life in the novel.¹⁹ However, after a bout with depression during the fall of 1920, Hesse returned to the manuscript. His protagonist, Siddhartha, emerged victoriously as a contemplative, appreciative of the greatness of the world and the wonders of nature.²⁰ The three themes I have selected in my interpretation of *Siddhartha* are the following: 1) Asceticism, 2) Time and Timelessness, 3) Unity. I conjecture that these themes were the lens or, at least, a partial lens through which Thomas Merton read the book. The surmise is based on my background reading of Thomas Merton's writings in which these three motifs constantly reoccurred.

Chapter One of the novel, *Siddhartha*, titled 'The Brahmin's Son', relates the early part of Siddhartha's life under the strong influence of his father and the institutional ways of the Brahmins.

Siddhartha decides to leave the security of his Brahmin life style and family to join the Samanas, a wandering group of monks who practised certain ascetic traditions of ancient India. Hesse describes Siddhartha's new life with the Samanas: 'Siddhartha had one single goal – to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow – to let the Self die'.²¹ The severe ascetic practices of the Samanas are illustrated in the next paragraph:

Silently Siddhartha stood in the fierce sun's rays, filled with pain and thirst, and stood until he no longer felt pain and thirst Silently he crouched among the thorns. Blood dripped from his smarting skin, ulcers formed, and Siddhartha remained stiff, motionless, till no more blood flowed, till there was no more pricking, no more smarting.²²

Hesse goes on to describe Siddhartha as he developed within the Samana tradition, including his practice of meditation, the killing of the senses, memory, the many ways of losing the Self, travelling the path of self-denial through the conquering of pain and suffering, 'hunger, thirst and fatigue.' Siddhartha emptied his 'mind of all images as a prerequisite for his growing practice of meditation'.²³ He left the Hinduism of his father because of its shortcomings as a way to enlightenment

and, so too, he ultimately leaves the Samanas for the same reason. After leaving the Samanas, Siddhartha and his friend, Govinda, seek out and find a new holy man known as Gotama the Buddha who instructs them in the ways of Buddhism, including the Eightfold Path with the Four Main Points. However, Siddhartha is still not satisfied after listening to Gotama and, therefore, decides to leave and seek answers about the meaning of life from the material world and its emphasis on the senses and pleasures of the flesh. He leaves behind his friend, Govinda, who is satisfied that he will find self-realization by following Gotama the Buddha.²⁴

As Thomas Merton finished reading *Siddhartha* shortly after he gave his conferences to the religious in Alaska, he must have mused about the blatant asceticism that Siddhartha experienced during his time with the Samanas.²⁵ At one point in his conference titled 'The Life that Unifies', Merton quotes Martin Buber in the context of the latter's writings about 'unity of the soul':

Buber adds that people make the mistake of thinking that unification can be achieved by asceticism, and it cannot There is something that God has to bring about, and we can't trust in asceticism to do it.²⁶

In one of Thomas Merton's much earlier books, he included a chapter

dedicated to asceticism titled, 'Asceticism and Sacrifice'. He declares: 'If my soul silences my flesh by an act of violence, my flesh will take revenge on the soul, secretly infecting it with a spirit of revenge'.²⁷ At another point in the chapter, Merton clarifies the purpose of asceticism as he asserts: 'The real purpose of asceticism is to disclose the difference between the evil use of created things, which is sin, and their good use, which is virtue'.²⁸ Later in the chapter Merton speaks of the nervous ascetic who is 'agitated about every detail of his self-denial'.²⁹ Thus Merton, like Siddhartha, understands the shortcomings of asceticism as a way to salvation and or enlightenment.

The river, in *Siddhartha*, is the metaphor representing Time and Timelessness and the second theme I have selected to demonstrate a Hermann Hesse and Thomas Merton kinship related to the novel. Mileck presents the following view regarding time and timelessness after Siddhartha contemplates suicide as he sat by the river:

Siddhartha becomes progressively more intrigued by the ever-changing, yet never different, the ever-flowing yet always present river [F]urther contemplative observation of its waters persuades him to conclude that there is no such thing as time. Contemplation of the river

suggests only a present, no past, and no future. The river simply is. It is not a was and not a will be.³⁰

Let us listen, for a moment, to a conversation between Siddhartha and Vasudeva, the aged and enlightened ferryman, who has helped Siddhartha learn how to interpret the river's secrets. As they sit by the river, Siddhartha asks Vasudeva:

Have you also learned that secret from the river; that there is no such thing as time? ... Yes, Siddhartha Is this what you mean? That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future? That is it, said Siddhartha.³¹

Near the end of the novel, Siddhartha is conversing with his long-time friend, Govinda and he states:

During deep meditation it is possible to dispel time, to see simultaneously all the past, present and future, and then everything is good, everything is perfect, everything is Brahman.³²

The above quotation is an appropriate segue into Thomas Merton's views on time and timelessness. Like Hermann Hesse, Thomas Merton had a durational and an intuitive sense of time which is articulated by Ross Labrie when he states: 'For Merton, time, like nature, was a part of the goodness of the created world and of its Creator'.³³ Merton's view of time was eclectic and demonstrated knowledge of Henri Bergson's views on the subject. Specifically, Bergson defined the construct of durational time as follows:

[T]ime was intimately connected with intuitive consciousness that, unlike rational consciousness, could link the separate moments of experience into a necklace of unfolding motion and meaning For Bergson, and for Merton, physics converted time into separate measurable points that obscured its underlying unity.³⁴

In an early journal entry dated 15 October 1939, Thomas Merton likened a painting³⁵ to praying as it is a timeless expression of life, joy, peace, and serenity. These characteristics of praying expressed through the painting do not change over time and are representative of an action with no past or future, albeit 'it is full of movement ... but it does not *move*'.³⁶ Merton's description of time through the paint-

ing is durational, exhibiting an underlying unity although the original stillness of the painting is an evolving movement, imperfect in nature, allowing diverse interpretations.³⁷ For both Merton and Hesse time is interpreted, not in quantitative discrete units, but rather, a simultaneity with the collapsing of past and future into an everlasting present, not unlike the flowing of a river so aptly described by Hesse through the above quoted dialogic musings of the characters, Siddhartha, Vasudeva and Govinda.

Hesse's metaphor of the ferryman represented by Vasudeva, and eventually Siddhartha his successor, is significant as it relates to a Merton passage in *The Asian Journal* about a type of meditation practice that he found in his journey to the East. Merton describes his visit with Chogye Thichchen Rimpoche, 'a lama, mystic, and poet of the Sakyapa school, one of the best so far.'³⁸ They discussed samadhi,³⁹ a form of meditation 'without object and without concept'. Their discussions led to Bodhicitta⁴⁰ which focuses on love and compassion. There are three kinds of bodhicitta and the second form is that of a 'boatman' who ferries himself along with others to salvation.⁴¹

The ferryman is the symbol of the means to salvation, the achievement of unity by Siddhartha. As he grew in wisdom under the mentoring of Vasudeva by the river, Siddhartha was preparing his soul through 'the secret art of thinking,

feeling and breathing thoughts of unity at every moment of life'.⁴² While Siddhartha listened to the river, 'the song of a thousand voices', he did not attend to any one voice, but rather, he 'heard them all, the whole, the unity'.⁴³ Finally, Siddhartha's face reflected 'the serenity of knowledge ... [one] who has found salvation ... [and] is in harmony with the stream of life ... belonging to the unity of all things'.⁴⁴ Now Vasudeva, Siddhartha's silent and profound mentor, 'saw the serenity of knowledge shining' in his eyes and said to him:

'I have waited for this hour, my friend. Now that it has arrived, let me go. I have been Vasudeva, the ferryman, for a long time. Now it is over. Farewell hut, farewell river, farewell Siddhartha.' Siddhartha bowed low before the departing man. 'I knew it,' he said softly. 'Are you going into the woods?' 'Yes, I am going into the woods; I am going into the unity of all things,' said Vasudeva, radiant.⁴⁵

And so, Siddhartha watched his friend and spiritual mentor leave with glowing face, full of light and peace.

Fresh from his Alaska trip, Merton must have revelled in the passages of Siddhartha's final self-realization assisted by his friend, Vasudeva – both having achieved a unity of being with Om.⁴⁶ Unity is

the final theme of the essay.

Merton, of course, had given conferences to the religious in Alaska and the concept of unity was not uncommon in his talks. One conference, given earlier in Alaska, was titled 'The Life that Unifies' and in one passage Merton is speaking about the contemplative life in monastic communities. He declares that the real aim of his life is 'love' or 'union' with God. He further asserts that '[t]he contemplative life and the monastic life "unify", both in terms of community – a unity of persons in a community – and also unity within myself ... [a result of my] love of God'.⁴⁷ Within the context of the monastic setting, Merton continues his message of unity in this same conference when he states: '[The] final integration and unification of man in love is what we are really looking for.' Merton contends that we need to develop people 'full of love who keep the fire of love burning in the world. For that they have to be fully unified and fully themselves – real people'.⁴⁸ In his book, *The Inner Experience*, published posthumously, Merton states that, 'The story of Adam's fall from Paradise says, in symbolic terms, that man was created as a contemplative. The fall from Paradise was a fall from unity'.⁴⁹ Indeed, the fall resulted in a shattering of the glass of unity into many different pieces representing division and multiplicity. Adam as the symbol of all mankind, then, had to attempt to

restore the shattered unity through the practice of meditation and contemplation. Perhaps the best statement by Thomas Merton regarding the restoration of unity after the fall is as follows: 'Whatever I may have written, I think all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: *that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ*'.⁵⁰

This unity with 'Himself and with one another in Christ' implies service to others which was a Hermann Hesse theme expressed through an epiphanic event near the end of his novel, *Siddhartha*. The ferryman, Vasudeva, gradually relinquished his duties to Siddhartha, who ferried travellers across the river. The travellers included 'businessmen, soldiers and women' – all who were once alien to him. But as Siddhartha grew in wisdom by listening to the river, he realized these travellers 'no longer seemed alien to him as they once had ... [and] he now felt as if these ordinary people were his brothers'.⁵¹ Of course, this new revelation to Siddhartha is reminiscent of Thomas Merton's epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky on 18 March 1958.⁵² Both of these epiphanies, one a fictional representation and the other a real life experience, highlight Merton's aforementioned statement that people who are fully unified themselves and 'full of love ... [and] will keep the fire of love burning in the world.' *Siddhartha*,

indeed, was the climactic work of Hermann Hesse in expressing his own self-realization through unity and love. We can only conjecture that Thomas Merton read the novel through this lens, hopeful of his own self-realization as he journeyed to the Far East.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.10. See endnote 11, p.21, which states the following: 'Siddhartha in Sanskrit, the Buddha's actual name was Siddhartha Gautama. Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, however, relates the life of one of the Buddha's earliest disciples.' Contrary to this endnote, in my review of the Hermann Hesse primary source material (letters, essays, etc) and critical commentaries of the novel I have found no evidence that Hesse's novel, *Siddhartha*, was intended to be about the life of one of Buddha's earliest disciples
2. The other two novels by Hermann Hesse are titled: *Journey to the East* and *Steppenwolf*. These two novels and Thomas Merton's comments are the subject of another one of my essays, 'Where Are We Going? Always Home: Thomas Merton and Hermann Hesse', to be published in *Religion and the Arts*: vol.16, numbers 1-2, March 2012.
3. It is noted that George Kilcourse

- describes Thomas Merton's integration of a 'literary imagination' with his spiritual life. He states: 'The evidence of his personal reading habits suggests that [Merton] nurtured his mature contemplative life by reading a diverse spectrum of novelists.' George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p.128. Therefore, I would suggest that Thomas Merton read Hermann Hesse during his travels in 1968 because the novels were exemplars of the imaginative literature that enhanced his spirituality and provided the needed balance with the many authoritative texts he was reading about Eastern religions.
4. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p.402.
 5. Joseph Mileck, *Hermann Hesse, Between the Perils of Politics and the Allure of the Orient*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003), p.151.
 6. Protestant Pietism was the family religion.
 7. Mileck, *Hesse, Between the Perils of Politics and the Allure of the Orient*, p.92.
 8. *ibid*, pp.117-118. Note. Thomas Merton wrote a preface to Bhagavad-Gita which is included in *The Asian Journal*, pp.348-353.
 9. *ibid*, p. 117. Note. 'The Kingdom of God is within' appears frequently in Hesse's writings. That God is within was not an uncommon theme in much of Thomas Merton's writing.
 10. *ibid*, p.119.
 11. *ibid*, p.112.

12. *ibid*, p.113.
13. *ibid*, p.133.
14. *ibid*, p.150.
15. Joseph Mileck, *Hermann Hesse, Life and Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p.160.
16. *ibid*, p.161.
17. *ibid*, p.162.
18. *ibid*, p.165.
19. Mileck, *Hesse, Between the Perils of Politics and the Allure of the Orient*, p.144.
20. *ibid*, p.144.
21. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, translated by Hilda Rosner (New York: Bantam Books, 1951), p.14.
22. *ibid*, p.14.
23. *ibid*, p.15.
24. *ibid*, pp.20-42.
25. As noted in the text earlier, Thomas Merton remarked that he had finished reading *Siddhartha* on 15 October 1968. His Alaskan conferences to religious were delivered from 18 September to 1 October 1968.
26. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (New York: New Directions, 1988), p.152.
27. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p.96.
28. *ibid*, p.106.
29. *ibid*, p.114.
30. Mileck, *Hermann Hesse, Life and Art*, p.166.
31. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, pp.106-107.
32. *ibid*, p.144.
33. Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p.98.
34. *ibid*, p.99.
35. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p.53. The painting described by Thomas Merton is *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Fra Angelico. Merton's assertion about the painting is: 'Completely perfect composition.'
36. *ibid*, p.53.
37. *ibid*, p.53.
38. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p.119.
39. Samadhi: 'Sanskrit and Pali, profound meditation'. The term and concept are common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, though, of course, with variations of interpretation and practice in each. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p.398.
40. Bodhicitta is an important term in all forms of Buddhism. It essentially means a Being that is enlightened. *The Asian Journal*, p.369.
41. The first kind of bodhicitta is 'kingly - in which one seeks spiritual power to save oneself and then save others.' The third form is the most perfect as the shepherd 'enters salvation last' after shepherding others into the eternal kingdom. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p.120.
42. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, p.131.
43. *ibid*, p.136.
44. *ibid*, p.136.
45. *ibid*, pp.136-137.
46. Om. In Hinduism, it is both the personal and impersonal god. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p.390.

47. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p.145.
48. *ibid*, pp.147-149.
49. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 2003), p.35.
50. William Shannon, *Thomas Merton, An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), p.ii.
51. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, pp.129-130.
52. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), pp.140-142.

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