

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Siddhartha**

by Hermann Hesse

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# Siddhartha

## Background Information

### HINDUISM AND THE ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM

Hinduism is based on the *Vedas*, an ancient group of prayers and hymns brought to India by the Aryans in about 1500 B.C. Later, a system of social classes or castes was added. These castes are very strict and hereditary. People are born into a caste and remain there throughout their lives. There are five castes:

- Brahman – priests who guard the traditions and rites of Hinduism
- The nobility
- Those who engage in commerce
- Servants
- The untouchables – the lowest class who do dirty jobs like cleaning up human waste

This religion of castes is called **Brahmanism**. The **Upanishads** is an ancient text that explicates the **Vedas** and explains individualism; it teaches about the existence of a universal soul. Individuals must follow their **Karma** (fate) through many lives or reincarnations until they can be united with the universal soul. To do this, they must understand the **Maya** (illusion of time and space). The Hindu religion teaches that the beauty of nature must be ignored because it is an illusion. The Hindu religion is very strict; its practice includes prayers, sacrifices, pilgrimages to sacred places, and bathing in sacred rivers.

Buddhism first appeared in the fifth century B.C., when a wealthy young man (later to be known as Gotama) left his family and their wealth to look for a way to end human suffering.\* Through meditation, he learned that the path to **Nirvana** (“nothingness” or the escape from the cycle of endless rebirths) is through breaking away from all ties of love and desire. His followers called him **Buddha**, the Enlightened One. Buddhism differs from Hinduism because it offers its followers a code for living, as well as the promise of eternal salvation.

\* Gotama’s family name was Prince Siddhartha

Buddha teaches four Noble Truths:

- Existence is suffering.
- Suffering arises from desire.
- Suffering ends when desire ends.
- The way to end desire is to follow the Eight-Fold Path.

# Siddhartha

## Notes

The novel *Siddhartha* is written as a quest. The novel's protagonist searches throughout his lifetime for his path to Nirvana—his escape from the cycle of births and rebirths. Siddhartha begins his life practicing Hinduism as a member of the Brahman caste. He leaves this life of luxury to pursue a life of deprivation with the Samanas. Soon, he learns of the existence of a holy man, Gotama. Gotama is the founder of Buddhism and teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana. Siddhartha travels to meet Gotama. After listening to the holy man, Siddhartha concludes that no one can teach him his path to Nirvana. Continuing his quest, he experiences the pleasures of the senses and the lure of materialism. Hesse combines the doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, and, at the end of the story, Christianity in his presentation of Siddhartha's path to Nirvana.

It is essential that students familiarize themselves with the Required Background Information which presents an overview of Hinduism and Buddhism. Also, since Hesse's novels are noted for their autobiographical undertones, it is helpful if students review the brief biography of the author.

The quest, written in the form of an oral tradition, includes repetition of events and epithets. On this quest, Siddhartha shares with the reader the wisdom he acquires.

# Siddhartha

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. infer ideas about characters and events when those ideas are not explicitly stated.
2. comment on the author's use of predictions of future events as a way of foreshadowing and maintaining the reader's interest.
3. cite examples of epithets in the story and discuss how they help to remind the reader of significant character traits.
4. understand the impact the Hindu religion has on the protagonist's early life and be able to define the following terms:
  - Brahmins
  - caste system
  - Samanas
5. define the following elements of Buddhism and discuss how the structure of the book follows these twelve steps to salvation:
  - The Four Noble Truths
  - The Eight-Fold Path
6. support the elements of allegory in this novel:
  - the structure of the novel, which parallels The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path taught by Buddha
  - the names of the characters, which stand for ideas
  - the underlying religious, political, social, or satirical meaning.
7. cite an example of irony in the story by illustrating how the main character becomes seduced by the lure of materialism.
8. define "quest" and prove that this story is an example of a quest narrative.
9. discuss how the author employs the techniques of oral tradition to review the protagonist's progress on his quest for salvation.

# Siddhartha

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Define allegory. How do the structure of the story and the names of the characters give evidence that this novel is an example of an allegory?
2. What do the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religions teach about the importance of love, teachers, and physical pleasure?
3. How did Hesse's confinement to a sanitarium and his strict Lutheran childhood influence his work?
4. Define "reincarnation" and explain the caste system. Do you think Siddhartha believes that one of the untouchables is just as worthy of love as a Brahman? Why or why not?
5. Why does Siddhartha become addicted to gambling? What is ironic about this addiction?
6. Compare Govinda's life with Siddhartha's life. Support the statement that Govinda deserves the epithet "the shadow" at the beginning of the story, but not at the end.
7. Which of the Four Noble Truths does Siddhartha experience when he meets Gotama?
8. In what way does Siddhartha's doctrine of love stem from the principles of Christianity?
9. Give two examples of Siddhartha's extreme self confidence, which borders on arrogance.
10. Give examples which support that, although Siddhartha is not in love with Kamala, she helps him learn to love.
11. List the three accomplishments Siddhartha gains from his time as a Samana.
12. How is Siddhartha's relationship with his son similar to Siddhartha's relationship with his own father?
13. What is the significance of the river to Siddhartha's life in the following instances?
  - when he first crosses and meets Kamala
  - when he awakens after contemplating suicide to see Govinda again
  - when he lets Govinda kiss his forehead
14. Why does Kamala release her song bird from its cage and close her house after Siddhartha leaves? Why does she not try to find him?

## With the Samanas

### Vocabulary

**abscesses** – infected areas  
**assiduous** – diligent  
**beatified** – blessed by heaven  
**befitting** – suitable for  
**brambles** – bushes that have thorns or are otherwise prickly  
**castigation** – punishment or severe criticism  
**consolations** – ways to soothe grief  
**delusion** – something that is misleading or deceptive  
**doctrine** – one of the principles held by a group  
**emanated** – originated  
**hearkened** – listened  
**inclination** – liking; desire to do something  
**laden** – loaded; burdened  
**lamenting** – mourning loudly; wailing  
**mantle** – a loose, sleeveless garment worn over other clothes  
**meditate** – to think about or consider  
**mortified** – subdued  
**pious** – sacred; religious  
**questing** – searching  
**realms** – domains; kingdoms  
**repose** – rest; peace  
**retention** – holding  
**revilement** – verbal abuse  
**secular** – not sacred or related to religion  
**succumbed** – gave in to a superior or overpowering force  
**whit** – bit

*NOTE: Read this chapter with the Second Noble Truth in mind: Suffering arises from desire.*

1. Why does Siddhartha fast, abstain from sex, and withdraw completely from anything that provides him comfort?

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6. What does the name Kamala mean? What does Kamala want Siddhartha to accomplish before she accepts him as a pupil? How does Siddhartha respond to her requirements?

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7. What is inferred, but not actually stated, in the following quotation?

“But tell me, beautiful Kamala, do you not have any fear of the samana from the forest who has come here to learn love? ... he’s strong, the Samana, and he fears nothing. He could force you, beautiful girl. He could abduct you. He could hurt you.”

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8. List the three accomplishments Siddhartha gains from his time as a samana. What advice does Kamala give Siddhartha in his relationship with the merchant Kamaswami?

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9. The first goal of the Eight-Fold Path defined by Buddha is “right belief.” What do you think is the “right belief” Siddhartha pursues in this chapter?

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## The Ferryman

### Vocabulary

**admonished** – warned  
**constitute** – make up or compose  
**countenance** – face  
**crystalline** – very clean and sparkling  
**ensued** – followed  
**piteous** – arousing pity  
**precocious** – early in development  
**premonition** – a feeling that something is about to happen  
**pyre** – a combustible heap used for the ritualistic burning of a body  
**recount** – tell in detail  
**redoubled** – made twice as great in amount

*NOTE: Read this chapter and determine if Siddhartha accomplishes the fifth part of the Eight-Fold Path–Right Occupation.*

1. What does Siddhartha’s inner voice tell him about the river?

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2. What does the name Vasudeva mean? Why is Vasudeva a good listener?

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3. What has Siddhartha already learned from the river? Find an example of foreshadowing in Vasudeva’s conversation with Siddhartha.

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