

Yoga Book Club: Siddhartha

Reading Guide (Week 1)

Overview

Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* explores key themes in yoga history. Its deceptively simple story narrates how a man rejects his family's traditions to seek enlightenment. Although that sounds like the life of the Buddha, this is a different Siddhartha. He encounters the Buddha, as well as other teachers, but his ultimate search is for something inside him. His quest for liberation struck a chord when the book appeared in English in the 1950s, appealing to outsiders, seekers and activists alike. Although *Siddhartha* is partly about self-awareness in a Western sense, it is set among nonconformists who first practised yoga, and its ideas transcend generations and cultural boundaries.

Preparations

To prepare for the book club's first session, on Wednesday 8 April, please read the first three chapters of any translation (quotations here are from the original by Hilda Rosner), noting passages you'd like to discuss, as well as any questions. The following notes offer guidance on themes to consider.

Historical Context

Yoga began among ascetics on the fringes of society. Most had renounced worldly life, performing austerities in search of liberation from rebirth. There were many different groups and they all shared ideas – the Buddha had yogic teachers before his awakening, and early yogic texts borrow Buddhist ideas. Collectively, these ascetics are known as *shramanas* (meaning “people who strive”) in Sanskrit – or *samanas* in Pali, the language of the Buddha's early discourses (and the term used in *Siddhartha*). Many turned their backs on Vedic ritual, challenging the power of Brahmin priests. Rulers and merchants supported Buddhism, and urbanisation drew people away from the sacrificial culture of Vedic religion, while newer philosophies about ending suffering seemed more relevant. However, these yogic and Buddhist ideas were also included in Brahmin texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, becoming combined with worldlier teachings. The latter addressed different aspects of human life, including the pursuit of prosperity and pleasure.

Notes on Names

Buddha – the word itself means “awakened” as well as a teacher.

Siddhartha – “one who has accomplished his goal”, i.e. he's awakened.

Gautama (or *Gotama*) – the name of the Buddha's family.

Shakyamuni – “sage of the Shakyas”: the local clan where the Buddha lived.

Govinda – literally a “cowherd”; also used as a synonym for Krishna.

Chapter 1 – “The Son of the Brahman”

A perspective on Vedic culture

- Siddhartha finds tradition inadequate. It seems unable to satisfy his needs, or alleviate his angst. He feels ultimately empty at his core.

- Although many wise words have been shared (e.g. in the Upanishads, which teach that the *atman* inside all beings is the same as everything, or Brahman), there seems no technique that could bring them to life.
- Impressed by the power of ascetics, he copies their methods, holding a posture for hours on end, and ignoring his father's appeals to stop. Siddhartha leaves his family to learn more about asceticism.

Chapter 2 – “Among the Samanas”

The life of renunciate ascetics

- Echoing the Buddha's austerities, Siddhartha exposes his body to extremes. Eventually he learns to dissociate from sensory discomfort.
- His descriptions of detachment suggest hints of insight, but society disgusts him. “It all stank of lies,” he says, because no one admitted that all things decay, so “the world tasted bitter” and “life was torture.”
- No matter what austerity he tries, he's still left with the sense that most things are pointless. Even if he meditates into absorption for days at a time, he returns to himself and his gnawing angst.
- Philosophically, he swings between Buddhist ideas about “no self” and Vedantic teachings on the *atman* saying: “the ultimate part of me had to awake, the innermost of my being, which is no longer my self.”
- This goal feels elusive despite his efforts. What he learns about change and decay could have also been learned in bars and brothels. He concludes that trying to get somewhere is part of his problem.

Chapter 3 – “Gotama”

With Buddhist monks

- His friend Govinda persuades him to join him on a quest to find the Buddha. Siddhartha doubts if there's anything to teach that he hasn't heard already, but when they meet the Buddha, he seems impressed.
- Nonetheless, Siddhartha decides against becoming a monk. He talks to the Buddha about his doubts: “You will not be able to convey and say to anybody, oh venerable one, in words and through teachings what has happened to you in the hour of enlightenment!”
- Siddhartha fears that teachings can make him dependent, trapping him in rituals instead of awakening. The Buddha warns he's getting lost in opinions, and being too clever to see what matters. However, Siddhartha departs – “renouncing” again – and feels encouraged.
- His individuality is distinctively Western. His dilemmas give voice to Hermann Hesse's own personal struggles after World War I.

Quotation

“We have learned a lot, Siddhartha, there is still much to learn. We are not going around in circles, we are moving up, the circle is a spiral, we have already ascended many a level.” (Govinda to Siddhartha, chapter 2)