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# The Heroism of Siddhartha: A Journey to Enlightenment

Isabel R. Nonemaker



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THE HEROISM OF SIDDHARTHA:  
A JOURNEY TO ENLIGHTENMENT

ISABEL R. NONEMAKER

*“Enlightenment is the key to everything, and it is the key to  
intimacy, because it is the goal of true authenticity.”*

-- Marianne Williamson

A man once came to see the Buddha to get help with his problems. After the man had told the Buddha one of his problems and asked for help, the Buddha replied: “I cannot help you get rid of that problem.”

The man was surprised that the Buddha could not help him in this regard, but he told the Buddha about another problem; he thought to himself that the Buddha should at least be able to help him with that problem. But the Buddha told him “I cannot help you with that problem either.”

The man started to get impatient. He said: “How can it be that you are the perfectly Enlightened Buddha, when you can’t even help people get rid of their

problems?” The Buddha answered: “You will always have 83 problems in your life. Sometimes a problem will go, but then another problem will come. I cannot help you with that.”

The baffled man asked the Buddha: “But, what can you help me with, then?” The Buddha replied: “I can help you get rid of your 84th problem.” The man asked: “But what is my 84th problem?” The Buddha replied: “That you want to get rid of your 83 problems” (Anderson, 2012).

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For generations, humans have been faced with an inescapable thirst for material, social, and political perfection. Many modern heroes fulfill these wants through the glory of their physical risk and victories. But there is another type of hero: the kind that does not care about being viewed as ideal but focuses on their bliss, calling, and unbreakable contentedness. This hero, the Buddhist hero, takes risks and experiences victory internally and religiously.

Buddhism is the practice of finding pure contentment and enlightenment (Tucci et.al., 2017). The central goals for followers are to lead a moral life, to be mindful and aware of thoughts and actions, and to develop wisdom and understanding (Mittelman, 1991). The creator of this religion, the Buddha, is considered a hero by many because he founded the idea to escape mentally from social pressures of perfection, and he emphasized self-acceptance (Tucci, 2017). A 1922 novel written by Hermann Hesse features a young boy who realizes the importance of resisting social pressure and an unpurposeful lifestyle. Siddhartha goes on a life-altering endeavor at a young age and displays all of the qualities that heroism entails; he continues his mission until he finds his awakening, following the pattern of the distinct hero’s journey.

Siddhartha is the main character in the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. He is a young boy who grows up and faces the common internal struggle of finding himself, his values, and his life’s purpose. While many people would accept the comfortable and affluent life he was born into, Siddhartha calls on himself to reject the lack of ambition he believes he has (Hesse, 2005). Readers can notice Siddhartha’s capability of becoming a hero through his growing awareness of the importance of enlightenment at such a young age. It is very rare to read a

story about a child who voluntarily calls on himself to endure a heroic journey, especially in his unforceful circumstances. The only motivation behind making a change in his life was Siddhartha's desire to experience true happiness and disconnect from the material world.

#### HEROIC JOURNEY

Siddhartha is considered a religious figure who undergoes a spiritual transformation, as this is a fictional novel about his path to becoming submerged into Buddhism. A religious figure is someone “dedicated to life-long religious service embodying highest principles or breaking new religious/spiritual ground” (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). A spiritually transformative hero experiences a life changing conversion in beliefs about God and the universe (Allison & Goethals, 2017). However, he is not necessarily a creator of a religion like some heroes. Instead, he demonstrates to others how one person can adopt values and reject a life of wealth while gaining bliss and purpose. Siddhartha follows all the steps of the hero's journey, experiences a heroic transformation, makes sacrifices, and does everything he can to benefit himself and educate others.

Siddhartha's heroic cycle begins with his call to action. Enjoying an abundance of wealth and no problems to endure, Siddhartha becomes bored with his life and believes his purpose is nonexistent. He decides to leave his home because of his desire to find meaning and reject the status quo (Hesse, 2005). Siddhartha's courage is impressive, as the places he intends to visit are dangerous and unpredictable. There is no external pressure for Siddhartha to change his lifestyle or go anywhere; the exact opposite in fact is true. Siddhartha's parents and friends encourage him to stay in Brahman territory, persuading with statements regarding his family's money and all the material goods he has. Siddhartha continues to reject his loved one's requests and leaves to find enlightenment. It can be expected for a teenager to be drawn to materialistic incentives and the comfort of relying on parents. Siddhartha's persistence and his voluntary departure is extremely rare and displays the signs of a future hero.

## Mentors and Failures

The second phase of the heroic cycle is the initiation stage. During this part of the journey, a hero must face and defeat challenges, obstacles, and foes (Campbell, 1949). Heroes cannot overcome these obstacles without help from others, and these people emerge as their friends and mentors (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Govinda is Siddhartha's best friend from home and his sidekick. He does not encourage Siddhartha to leave for his journey but accepts the fact that Siddhartha does not want to adopt an ordinary and unfulfilling life. Govinda follows him to the Samanas, Siddhartha's first attempt at enlightenment. Govinda is essentially Siddhartha's first student, as he learns two lessons from Siddhartha: that adapting to a Brahman lifestyle is unfulfilling, and there is more to one's life than money. Eventually, Govinda and Siddhartha reunite at the end of the novel. Govinda has been on an enlightenment journey of his own, yet he has continued to fail in awakening. Siddhartha gives him advice, listens to him speak, and ultimately encourages his transformation. Although Govinda did not directly teach Siddhartha, he allowed him to experience the status of a leader and an archetypal wise man.

The Samanas are Siddhartha and Govinda's first stop on their journey toward finding enlightenment, and they teach Siddhartha what he does not want. The Samanas are a Buddhist group who believe that there is a purpose in self-harm and negligence of the body's natural wants and needs. The group's rituals included fasting, dehydration, cutting themselves, and staring into the sun for long periods of time. They act as a mentor for Siddhartha, not because they taught him how to awaken, but instead showed him that Samana Buddhism is not the correct method for him. Joseph Campbell's monomyth explains that one of the key steps of the heroic journey is overcoming obstacles and sometimes facing failures (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Challenges are an essential part of every hero's journey, and this was Siddhartha's first of many.

Gautama Buddha is one figure who has found full enlightenment. Siddhartha and Govinda hear about him and go to watch him speak. The Buddha lives in an effortlessly peaceful world, and he tells the two children that enlightenment must be experienced, not taught. Siddhartha declares that he must resume his journey independently. Gautama Buddha's advice is simple but makes a large impact on the rest of Siddhartha's conquest. Independence allows Siddhartha to follow his instincts without another person holding him back.

Siddhartha eventually runs into a ferryman, Vasudeva, and befriends him. Vasudeva gives him a straightforward piece of advice: to learn from the river. This advice initially sounds unhelpful, but it is later shown that the river is the answer to Siddhartha's enlightenment. Vasudeva is a minor mentor to Siddhartha at first, and he returns later on to assist him further. Another influencing figure comes along immediately afterward. Kamala is a woman who encourages Siddhartha to adopt a wealthy lifestyle of his own, one similar to the one from which he escaped. Their relationship was extremely counterproductive to his journey, but he becomes blinded by love. Siddhartha realizes that he needs to leave this life indulged in greed. Although Kamala is not a mentor in his enlightenment tactics, she is another form of failure that Siddhartha encounters. He falls victim to emotions, and Kamala ultimately slowed down his enlightenment process. Despite this, Kamala also made Siddhartha stronger. She forced him to face the lifestyle he tried to leave; he caved into it, ultimately regaining his original motivations to awaken himself. He failed, yet he also learned from his mistakes and rejected the easy escape from hardship, which is an essential aspect of becoming a hero.

## Return

Siddhartha leaves Kamala and returns to the ferryman, Vasudeva. When returning to the water, Siddhartha has an epiphany and realizes that enlightenment lies within the concept of a river; the water is everywhere at once yet still living presently. The acceptance of how something is, rather than how something should be, is the sign of an enlightened mind. Siddhartha finally gains this knowledge through his long experimental and experiential journey.

Siddhartha does not return to his Brahman country, but instead becomes a ferryman himself. In this role, he boats people across the river and quietly listens to their stories. He officially willed his life to be a supporter of others seeking their enlightenment, similar to how his mentors supported him in his journey. Siddhartha is not a direct hero to his future mentees, but he acts as a guide and listener. The belief that enlightenment must be an independent discovery remains with Siddhartha, but he knows guidance and advice remain helpful.

## Hero's Transformation

When one experiences a truly heroic transformation, they acquire a new mindset and perspective on life. Siddhartha undergoes an extreme self-transformation throughout his journey, and his changes accurately describe those of a hero. He becomes awakened and enlightened, able to see the world through the lens of wisdom and compassion (Allison et al., 2019).

## Purposes of Transformation

A hero's transformation is purposeful to both the hero and to the society in which he lives. Siddhartha develops as an individual throughout his story using his newfound present mindset and eternal contentedness. One of the central motivations for his entire journey is that Siddhartha feels he has no purpose as a wealthy Brahman's son. By the end of the novel, he found that guiding people is his mission, and living on the river is his bliss.

Transformations are also essential to healing and cultivating social unity (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018). In the religion of Buddhism, these purposes complement each other. Siddhartha undergoes a religious conversion and wishes for a community in which he can feel comfortable. It is believed that telling the stories of hero transformations can result in many of the same benefits as group therapy (Allison, 2015; Allison & Goethals, 2017). Some of these benefits include the fostering of self-awareness, the relief of stress, and the development of a sense of meaning about life (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Siddhartha's enlightenment and heroic journey heal his inner pain and feelings of confusion while integrating him into a religion that he later promotes to others. Siddhartha's internal pain eases, and he learns how to be a mentor in cultivating a community of Buddhism and supporting others' enlightenment journeys.

The most prominent purpose of Siddhartha's transformation is that it promoted a spiritual change in him. He now has a more profound spiritual and cosmic understanding. Joseph Campbell (1949) mentions that the hero's transformation involves "experiencing the supernormal range of human spiritual life" and "brings us into a level of consciousness that is spiritual" (Allison & Goethals, 2017). These changes characterize Siddhartha's journey perfectly, as his spirituality is at first nonexistent, slightly develops, diminishes again through his time

with Kamala, and eventually, blossoms into his Buddhist enlightenment. A central reason for his transformation can be found in his determination and self-will.

### Dimensions of Transformation

The term “hero” has an ambiguous connotation to it, as all heroes vary along ten dimensions of transformation (Allison & Goethals 2017). Siddhartha, a spiritual hero, will have many differences from a physical or militia hero within these realms of categorical measures. Siddhartha’s main aspects that set him apart from a stereotypical hero are the scale, whom his transformation affects, speed, his speed of transformation, timing, the permanence of the transformation, and whether his transformation stems from internal or external sources.

Siddhartha’s scale of heroism reaches to himself individually and to a group of potential enlightenment seekers. The novel was based primarily on a boy seeking an individual transformation and adventure to find purpose. The result was both his success in finding a meaning and developing into a mentor for many people in the future, similar to how the ferryman guided him. Siddhartha learned about himself, and he learned how to help others by being a person listens and dispenses advice.

The speed of Siddhartha’s metamorphosis severely lengthens due to his downfall into a seemingly inescapable love for a woman. His multiple failures, however, were essential to the outcome of his journey. Without visiting the Samanas, he never would have discovered the type of Buddhism to which he did not belong. Without Kamala, he never would have gained a sense of self-empowerment. He fell victim to her femininity, but in the end Siddhartha’s self-control became unmatched. His transformation consumed years and encased many failures, but his altered mindset stuck with him longer than his journey set him back.

The timing is one of the most impressive parts of Siddhartha’s transformation. When Siddhartha leaves his family and home, he is in his teenage years. As a teen, it is not uncommon to take advantage of the simple life, relying on parents and avoiding responsibility. Siddhartha is also the son of a very wealthy Brahman, a member of the highest Hindu caste, that of the



priesthood. However, Siddhartha does not aspire to become a Brahman himself. Despite having the social, material, political, and cultural dreams of many, he still recognizes that lacking ambition is unfulfilling. It could be argued that older people are more “ready” to embark on such a transformative journey. Siddhartha’s youthful willingness to leave the safety and luxury of home to become transformed truly underscores his willpower and determination to improve himself.

The source of Siddhartha’s heroic journey is purely internal and in a way counter-external. His cause of motivation to change resides in the natural needs to pursue goals. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs reveals that an individual is motivated to fulfill higher level needs once lower level needs are satisfied. Once the needs at the four lower levels are satisfied (physiological, safety, love, and esteem) one is no longer concerned with them (McLeod, 2007). One eventually is drawn to achieve self-actualization, which is Siddhartha’s ultimate destiny, as he acquires meaning, beauty, truth, and a sense of oneness with the world. The component of Siddhartha’s situation that most sets him apart from others resides in the fact that he rejected eternal material wealth and social status to embark on a self-enhancing journey. Siddhartha does follow the hierarchy of needs, climbs to the top, then dismisses the first four levels. This is psychologically rare and unnatural, but a hero should never be ordinary.

Overall, Siddhartha transforms from a lost and curious boy to a wise and content Buddhist man. His spiritual journey was challenging and unique, as it involved a calling, many mentors, failures, resurgences, and return. Siddhartha is the epitome of a changed man by the end of his story, and he fulfilled his goals exceptionally well.

#### SIDDHARTHA’S HEROISM

Heroism is a very ambiguous term in the explicit classification of who is a hero in contrast to who is not a hero. One reasonable objective definition of a hero is that a hero is a person who takes risks to help others without self-gain as motivation (Kafashan et al., 2017). A subjective hero is determined by a person’s opinions or experiences; this type of hero may be one person’s role model, but an ordinary figure to someone else (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017). Siddhartha

and his heroic journey can fit into both classifications. Siddhartha took risks by leaving his comfortable lifestyle and financial conditions to embark on an unpredictable and dangerous journey. He leaves to find self-awakening, and at first he was oblivious as to how, where, and when he would find it. Additionally, Siddhartha later becomes a ferryman and mentor for future persons on their enlightenment endeavors.

Although he fits most of the objective hero's requirements, he did not explicitly take a risk to help others. The reason he embarks on his heroic journey was for himself, and in doing so he left many people who cared about him. It is a subjective view on whether he still qualifies as a hero after considering this self-seeking motivation. From a subjective standpoint, Siddhartha is rightly a hero to anyone who perceives him as such. Because subjective heroism is based purely on perception and opinions, Siddhartha fits into the heroic realm easily. Siddhartha would be objectively regarded as a hero to those whom he mentored, and he is a hero because he served as an inspiration and role model to countless people over the centuries.

### The Great Eight

The great eight traits are essential to a hero's success and qualification. These features are: intelligent, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Siddhartha fulfills all eight of these characteristics, but four of them, intelligence, resilience, selflessness, and inspiring, are most prevalent throughout the novel. Siddhartha is intelligent because he has benefited from growing up as a Brahman's son who had access to schooling. However, Siddhartha is also emotionally wise as he can recognize his unhappiness and how to cure it. Resilience is displayed after he falls into a wealthy life because of Kamala. Although Siddhartha is in love and is strongly suppressed by his romance with Kamala, he reminds himself that returning to an affluent, unenlightened lifestyle is not what he intended on doing. He uses his resilience to ignore his temptation and re-embark on his adventure to awakening. Selflessness becomes apparent near Siddhartha's heroic return, once he becomes a wise riverman he devotes his life to helping others find spirituality like Vasudeva did for him.

Siddhartha did not begin utterly selfless because he left his family and community to find himself, but concurrently he left many material goods and his position of high status to do so. His selflessness was key to his transformation as well, as he went from only being occasionally selfless to a man who devoted his entire life to being content with minimalism and helping others. Lastly, Siddhartha was an inspiring man to those whom he mentored and to readers of this novel. He encouraged people to change their mentality and spirituality if they felt they had no purpose in life. As a riverman, Siddhartha inspired people to continue with their journeys despite their possible frustration and impatience; those feelings dissipate with enlightenment.

### Suffering

Siddhartha's suffering leads him into the intense and long journey that gives his life purpose. Many obstacles are faced during his journey, but Joseph Campbell explains "Where you stumble, there lies your treasure" (Huffington Post, 2017). Siddhartha stumbled in his sense of self and purpose, and instead of allowing this suffering to suppress him, he found his treasure. The heroic journey he undertook was unpredictable and challenging, but because he faced his difficulties, Siddhartha found success. Siddhartha gains enlightenment, contentedness, spirituality, and his ability to guide others as a Buddhist mentor. Siddhartha's suffering and treasure tie into the six benefits of suffering and how one's pain can turn into a success story. These six benefits are that suffering is redemptive, signifies a crossover point in life, encourages humility, stimulates compassion, promotes social union, and instills meaning and purpose (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). All of these positive outcomes of suffering depict Siddhartha's transformation extremely well.

First, he is redemptive because he uses his story to mentor people at the end of his adventure. Siddhartha saves people from their lack of self-acceptance and feelings of being lost, much like how he felt initially. Suffering also signifies a crossover point in life, a benefit that correlates closely to Siddhartha's situation. Siddhartha finds himself as a result of his spiritual journey, and such spiritual growth is often life-changing. Evolving from a Brahman's son to a Buddhist is an extreme inflection point in his life, and the largest change he has and will experience. Siddhartha's suffering also injected meaning and purpose in his life. Without his transformative heroic journey, Siddhartha would not be any different than any other Brahman. He would have no true sense of self beside the

facts that he was well liked, wealthy, and labeled. Finding enlightenment was Siddhartha's most central goal, and he accomplished it by successfully completing his journey. By acquiring his spirituality and later spreading his considerable wisdom to others, Siddhartha found meaning and purpose in his life, and he found meaning and purpose in his suffering by using it as motivation.

## CONCLUSION

Hermann Hesse wrote this bildungsroman novel inspired by the Buddha and the struggles one can face when trying to adopt a new spiritual lifestyle. Siddhartha's initial situation, hardships, unpredictable journey, and singular outcomes combine to reveal him to be a striking hero. Although many people struggle to find themselves and then adopt a religion, they are not all heroes. Siddhartha's tale encases the journey, transformation, return, and qualities that a hero must have. By teaching himself how to view the world in a different, relaxed, accepting way, Siddhartha is a role model for millions of people who are struggling with self-image. Relating Siddhartha's story to real life phenomena, we see that it is not uncommon for people to have a sense of confusion when navigating through our complex world. People today question their purpose more than in any time in human history. Siddhartha's story demonstrates to readers that if one is feeling lost and meaningless, the only person that can fix the feeling is oneself. Siddhartha's ambition, persistence, and courage contributed to his enlightenment and goal fulfillment. Siddhartha is destined to exert heroic influence on readers worldwide for many years to come.

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