

The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 8 & Issue 6 (December, 2023)


Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 31st December, 2023

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract Received on: 15th November 2023 | Full Article Received on: 17th November 2023 | Revision received on: 18th November 2023 | Plagiarism Checked on 19th November 2023 | Peer Review Completed on: 28th November 2023 | Article Accepted on 10th December 2023 | First Published on: 31st December 2023

Research Article




Siddhartha's Quest for Ultimate Truth: A Philosophical Analysis with Brahma Sutra Insights

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.6.09>

Pages: 77-85

Abstract

The present study is an inquiry into the philosophical and spiritual implications of Brahman that are inextricably linked to the thematic concerns illustrated in Hesse's novella *Siddhartha*. As

Siddhartha embarks on his journey toward enlightenment, he undergoes a profound transformation in his perception of the world. He comes to the realization that the world is interconnected, unified, and subject to cyclical patterns. This newfound awareness becomes pivotal in Siddhartha's quest for the ultimate truth, finally culminating in his identification with the supreme consciousness. In light of this, the paper aims to present an argument highlighting how Siddhartha's experiences and motivations are influenced by the philosophical concept of Brahman, as elucidated in the *Brahma Sutra*.

Keywords: Siddhartha, Brahma Sutra, Vedanta, Brahman, Unity, Enlightenment, Oriental philosophy

Introduction

A well-established historical truth is that India, with its rich heritage of ancient wisdom, has continually captivated the Western intellect for many decades. This magnetic pull towards the Orient, often referred to as the fascination with the East, primarily centers on matters of spiritual wisdom and religious philosophy enshrined in Indian scriptures. This profound knowledge has, in turn, paved the way for numerous Western scholars to express their creativity by narrating and reinterpreting stories infused with the diverse 'darsanas', or philosophical schools, of India. As this pursuit of knowledge intensifies, it becomes intricately intertwined with spiritual revelation, resulting in the gradual dissipation of 'avidya', or ignorance. While we allow these concepts to evolve within the context of our current exploration, it is crucial to acknowledge the overarching impact of Indian philosophy on the work of Hermann Hesse.

Equally significant is the exploration of how Arthur Schopenhauer's appreciation and interpretation of Indian philosophy are reflected in the writings of Hermann Hesse. This leads us to the German-Swiss author Arthur Schopenhauer, who openly expressed his admiration for Indian philosophical thought. It is widely acknowledged that Schopenhauer was a trailblazer among German thinkers in incorporating Indian philosophy into his works. Notably, his profound interest centered on the teachings of the Upanishads, a fascination he explicitly acknowledged in the preface of his book, *The World As Will And Idea*. Here, he writes, 'if one has also received and assimilated the sacred primitive Indian wisdom, then he is the best of all prepared to hear what I have to say to him' (13). Therefore, in considering the influence of Indian philosophy on the West, one cannot neglect the overarching persona of Arthur Schopenhauer, who put forth a symbiosis of the two (Eastern and Western philosophy) at the deepest level.

Schopenhauer's interpretations of Indian philosophy had a profound influence on Hermann Hesse. His works incorporated elements borrowed directly from primitive Indian texts. According to Eugene F. Timpe, 'The writings of Hermann Hesse, the German writer, have a deep and firm root in the Vedas, the Upanishads and in the Buddhism' (349). His major works reflect the ideas and philosophy explicated in the Vedanta texts—the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Brahma-sutra*. It is with respect to the *Brahma-sutra* that an attempt has been made to observe aspects of the Vedanta philosophy and its implications of Brahman in *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse.

The paper, albeit largely engages in philosophical exploration as well as literary analysis of the texts under study. That is to say, it seeks to explore the manner in which Hesse toys with the concept of Brahman to convey philosophical ideas and thematic elements within the novella. Hesse possessed a deep understanding of the Indian philosophical tradition and he skillfully integrated these concepts into his narratives. While these concepts are not overtly displayed, they gradually surface throughout the plot development and the careful grounding of thematic concerns. The concept of Brahman, therefore, forms the underlying foundation of Siddhartha's pursuit of the Absolute (Ultimate Truth), his comprehension of *Maya*, and his realization of Unity, among others.

Brahman: In Hinduism, Brahman is the ultimate, unchanging reality that underlies and unifies the diverse world of appearances. It is often described as the supreme, formless, and infinite consciousness that transcends all dualities and distinctions. Brahman is considered the source and essence of everything in the universe, and achieving union with Brahman is the ultimate goal of spiritual life. The concept of 'Brahman' has remained persistent throughout Hindu thought and is generally defined as the first cause of the world.

Its canonical definition is provided in the *Brahma-sutra* 1.1.2. 'जमाययतः॥२॥' 'Brahman is that omniscient, omnipotent cause from which proceed the origin, etc. (i.e., sustenance, and dissolution of this world)' (Gambhirananda 24-25). However, the earliest use of Brahman, as seen from within the Vedic corpus, suggested an identification of Brahman with 'inspired speech' (Uskokov 64) and with men who utter it. In this case, Brahman was realized as *sabda-brahman*, or the 'verbal Brahman,' (Uskokov 64) in which Brahman was associated with speech (the creative principle). The notion of Brahman gained prominence in the Upanishadic tradition, where it became the central object of reflection. The *Brahma-sutra*, then, systematized ideas pertaining to Brahman as the 'first principle' or the 'first cause of the world' (Uskokov 64).

The *Brahma-sutra*, or *Vedanta-sutra*, attributed to Badarayana, has been long established as the canonical text of the Vedanta school of philosophy. As its name specifies, the *Brahma-sutra* is a 'sutra' work and thus, part of a genre of texts that systematize varying aspects of Vedic learning and serve as practical guides for the acquisition of knowledge. 'Sutra' literally means 'thread,' which strings together the important ideas pertaining to a particular topic. A loose translation of the *sutra* seems to have been 'aphorism,' or terse sayings that are difficult to interpret in isolation. As a result, several commentaries have sprung up, particularly in relation to the *Brahma-sutra*. These commentaries, or 'Bhasya,' imply a body of work that explains the meaning of the *sutra* by statements compatible with its own words.

Brahma-sutra provides a systematization of the teaching of the Upanishads, specifically of its doctrine of Brahman, and therefore is sometimes called 'the science of deliberation on Brahman' (Gambhirananda 18) or *Brahma-vicara-sastra*. One of the central teachings of Vedanta, as reinforced in it, is the doctrine of the identity between Atman (the individual soul) and Brahman (the supreme reality). It provides a detailed exploration of this identity, emphasizing that the apparent duality between Atman and Brahman is an illusion. It posits that when one realizes the true nature of the self, they recognize themselves as identical with Brahman, transcending the limitations of individual existence and attaining a state of liberation or *moksha*.

Siddhartha's Journey and the Search for Brahman: Siddhartha, the novel's protagonist, begins his spiritual journey as a young Brahmin, initially adhering to the teachings and rituals of traditional Hinduism. However, he soon becomes disillusioned with the structured and dogmatic nature of organized religion. Seeking a more profound understanding of existence, Siddhartha embarks on a quest for personal enlightenment, determined to uncover the hidden truths of life. His encounter with the Buddha, to whom he speaks thus,

You have found salvation from death. It has come to you in the course of your own search, on your own path, through thoughts, through meditation, through realizations, through enlightenment. It has not come to you by means of teachings! And – thus in my thought, oh exalted one – nobody will obtain salvation by means of teachings! 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! (32)

Here, the spiritual dilemma is met with distrust for any form of teaching that seeks to direct an individual's course towards the attainment of salvation. Siddhartha had also left the highest and wisest teacher, not being able to accept his teachings. Nevertheless, he searched: 'I searched Atman, I searched Brahman' (37). He was skeptical of all forms of teaching but certain of his learning. 'I want to learn from myself, want to be my student, want to get to know myself, the secret of Siddhartha' (37).

Throughout his journey, Siddhartha encounters various philosophical and spiritual traditions, including the asceticism practiced by the Samanas, the materialism and sensuality of the city, and the teachings of the Buddha himself. Each phase of his life brings him closer to understanding the nature of reality and the concept of Brahman.

The River as a Metaphor: Siddhartha spends years living by the river and learns valuable lessons from it. He realizes that the river is constantly changing, yet it remains the same. This observation is a metaphor for the impermanence of the material world and the eternal nature of Brahman. The river becomes a symbol of the interconnectedness and unity of all existence, reflecting the central idea that Brahman is the underlying reality that unites everything. Siddhartha first learns from the river that everything is interconnected, and that time is an illusion. From the river, he learns the unity of all things—that past, present, and future all tied in a single strand, simultaneously asserting their presence. He says,

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. (98)

T. S. Eliot, in his 'Four Quartets,' expresses a similar notion of time when he says,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (Eliot 6)

The idea of the unity of time persists as an important premise (in both Christian and Indian systems of thought) for the exploration of larger theological and philosophical concerns pertaining to the attainment of the absolute. For Siddhartha, this unity comes from

understanding the secret of the river. 'I looked at my life, and it was also a river, and the boy Siddhartha was only separated from the man Siddhartha and from the old man Siddhartha by a shadow, not by something real' (99). Through this realization, Siddhartha understands the interconnectedness of all things and the cyclical nature of every life force.

In the novella, the river has significance beyond its manifestation as an elemental force, as non-distinct from Brahman. In this mode of analysis, the river is but an emanation of the Supreme Brahman. 'Brahman appears as this universe through *Maya*'. (Sivananda) Thus, the river becomes a metaphor for Brahman, who is the ultimate source from which every creation flows and into which every creation merges. The river could be arrived at through two different interpretations: (a) As an emanation of the Supreme Brahman. (b) As a manifestation of the all-pervading *Maya*. In the present scenario, the river assumes utmost significance because it is the effect of the primordial cause. At the same time, it is also an object that forms part of the world veiled by *maya*. The river taken to be the vital force represents this *maya* that is ultimately transcended when Siddhartha assumes oneness with its primordial cause, i.e., Brahman. At this point, it is worth noting that the concept of *Maya* as it occurs in the Brahma Sutra and the Vedanta philosophy at large does not imply illusion, deception, or phantasy. Colebrooke, in a paper on Vedanta delivered before the Royal Asiatic Society in 1827, said;

The notion that the versatile world is an illusion (*Maya*) and that all that passes to the apprehension of the waking individual is but a phantasy presented to his imagination, and every seeming thing is unreal and all is visionary, does not appear to be the doctrine of the text of the Vedanta. (Muller 72)

Hesse's novella seems to correspond to this idea, as Siddhartha's tryst with 'right understanding' mandates his realization of the unity of the material and the non-material world in Brahman. Therefore, he is not dismissive of the phenomenal world, largely understood as a creation of *Maya*. Siddhartha's transcendence, then, does not involve his overcoming the material world which may or may not be coloured by a deceptive, unreal force. Rather, it is his realization of the unity and interconnectedness of all creation that marks his transcendence of the unreal. Only when he understands *maya* as a creative force of Brahman he is able to move from nescience to knowledge. 'But it is mere *maya*; on account of the true nature (of the soul) not being fully manifested' (Muller 83).

This was his understanding, which came from observing the river. Siddhartha had stopped by the river as he walked through the forest, having discarded the pleasures of worldly life. He had bathed in luxuriant bliss, experienced love, and consummated it; however, he was still troubled in mind and soul. He had felt passion and basked in its light, but it was yet darkened in every corner of his conscience. In a deep inner turmoil, he came by the river and saw the shadow vanishing. The dark shadow of ignorance that had burdened his soul fiddled with his desire to seek oneness, rendering him incapacitated to achieve it.

The Sound of Om: In one of the novel's pivotal moments, Siddhartha has a transformative encounter with a ferryman named Vasudeva. Under Vasudeva's guidance, Siddhartha learns to listen to the river's sound, which ultimately reveals to him the mystical sound of Om—the sacred syllable that represents the essence of Brahman.

Om entered his consciousness; he became aware of himself in his misery and in his error... 'Om! he spoke to himself: Om! and again he knew about Brahman, knew about the indestructibility of life, knew about all that is divine, which he had forgotten. (82)

He speaks of the word as 'the beginning and the end of all prayers of the Brahmins, the holy 'Om,' 'that which is perfect' or 'the completion' (82). 'The nameless,' 'the perfected,' (83) he says again, then, meditating upon it, learns another time of unity, interconnectedness, and oneness. On account of such attributes, then, can the word 'Om' be deliberated upon as the word of the Supreme Brahman? As an answer, a corresponding idea finds expression in St. John. 'All things were made by the Word, and without the Word was not anything made that was made' (Muller 78). Here, the 'Word' is synonymous with the ultimate reality, consciousness, or the underlying essence of the universe. A similar argument is made by Muller when he says,

I think that Brahman was originally understood in the sense of Word, for immediately afterwards *vach*, Speech, takes the place of Brahman, and from it everything else is produced. I should therefore translate, 'He created first of all the Word,' from which everything else proceeded. (Muller 79)

Elsewhere, he writes, 'the first bursting forth of the world was the word or thought uttered in and by Brahman' (Muller 80). In light of this, one might consider the sacred syllable 'Om' as the word of Brahman, which reveals the 'Divine Essence.' It is by meditating on it that Siddhartha 'knew about the indestructibility of life; he knew about all that is divine, which he had forgotten' (Hesse 82). Here, he conceived of the transcendent power that united all life forms. He learned of the 'Word', and he would learn of Brahman thereafter. Siddhartha would learn of the 'Word' as Brahman. As occurs in the *Maitrayana Upanishad*, 'Two Brahmins have to be meditated on, the word and the non-word. By the word alone is the non-word revealed' (Muller 82).

The Wisdom of Vasudeva: Siddhartha's interactions with Vasudeva, the ferryman, help him in understanding the Brahman. Vasudeva imparts the wisdom that the river teaches, emphasizing the importance of listening to its voice and becoming attuned to the unity of all things. This guidance leads Siddhartha closer to a realization of his oneness with the universe, aligning with the concept of Brahman. One cannot help but wonder if Vasudeva and the philosophy he represents bear any likeness to Lord Krishna. Not in much as the similarity in name, but the character's resemblance to the Lord, who is the charioteer, and guide to the Pandava prince Arjuna in the battle at Kurukshetra. Vasudeva is the ferryman carrying Siddhartha against the current of illusion and towards an identification with the Absolute. 'You indeed are our father who have ferried us across nescience to the other shore' (Gambhirananda 29).

He had encountered Vasudeva earlier, crossed the river in his ferry, and stayed in his hut. However, those were the days when he was not battered down in spirit; he had not yet felt the darkness in his soul. His recent expeditions in worldly life had disturbed him, and he felt alienated and lost. At this crucial moment, Vasudeva assisted him in understanding the real nature of the world. It was Vasudeva who directed him to the river, saying, 'The river has taught me to listen, from it you will learn it as well. It knows everything, the river, everything can be learned from it' (97). His lesson in oneness taught him that, "There was nothing standing

between Gotama and him anymore...there was nothing standing between him and all the other thousand anymore who lived in that what is eternal, who breathed what is divine” (102).

Siddhartha learned silence from Vasudeva. Vasudeva had listened to his cries of sorrow and listened in silence. As in a river, Siddhartha had flung his worries, pain, and grief onto Vasudeva. All this he had felt after his son had left him. Then he had suffered the pangs of separation, and then he had experienced a desire for union. And so, in a state of despair, he disclosed his wound to Vasudeva.

To show his wound to this listener was the same as bathing it in the river, until it had cooled and become one with the river. While he was speaking, still admitting and confessing, Siddhartha felt more and more that this was no longer Vasudeva, no longer a human being who was listening to him, that this motionless listener was absorbing his confession into himself like a tree the rain, that this motionless man was the river itself, that he was the eternal itself. (122)

While disclosing his wounds to Vasudev, he also realized the cyclical nature of pain, ‘The same pain was suffered over and over again’ (121). And thus, he saw his face as the face of his father, both united in a yearning for their distant child. He understood that everything is tied into everything, ‘The image of his father, his own image, and the image of his son merged’ (123). He felt the oneness of all creation in Brahman. ‘Everything is good, everything is perfect, everything is Brahman’ (131). He saw no man as distinct from Buddha, ‘Within the sinner is now and today already the future Buddha, his future is already all there, you have to worship in him, in you, in everyone the Buddha which is coming into being, the possible, the hidden Buddha’ (130). Siddhartha, now removed from nescience, neither embraced nor discarded *Maya* as worthless ‘because it is already and always everything,’ ‘this stone is a stone, it is also animal, it is also god, it is also Buddha’ (131). In understanding this, Siddhartha was renewed in his identity, which entailed a complete identification with Brahman.

The Unity of All Things: Of the self as non-distinct from Brahman, the Brahma Sutra explicates,

अतोऽनन्तने तथा हि लिंगम् ॥ ३.२.२५॥ (Gambhirananda 630)

The given sutra corroborates the idea of an individual being non-distinct from Brahman. This identification, it says, is indicated in the Upanishad. However, even refuting the claims of the Upanishad, it is validated by the fact that no knowledge of Brahman entails non-identification with him. ‘Difference is a creation of ignorance, the individual destroys ignorance through knowledge and attains unity with the supreme, eternal, conscious self’ (Gambhirananda 630).

This idea seeps into the philosophy of Hesse as he expresses thematic concerns of unity, oneness, and identification with the Supreme Brahman. Siddhartha is initially troubled because he lacks an understanding of the unity of all creation. He is at peace after realizing that everything is tied up in unity with Brahman, that everything manifests as Brahman, and that everything is contained in Brahman. Even the material world, then, becomes an extension of Brahman because it carries in itself the potentiality of life force. If otherwise, it is confirmed by the fact that Brahman is the material cause of the world.

प्रकृतिश्च प्रतिज्ञादृष्टान्तानपरोधात् ॥ १.४.२३॥ (Gambhirananda 291)

To reiterate, the aforementioned sutra speaks of Brahman as the material cause of the world. This refutes the primal view of Brahman as an efficient cause, 'in the sense in which a potter, a goldsmith, and others are the causes' (Gambhirananda 292). Brahman is the efficient cause, but it is also the material cause 'since the effect is non-different from its material' (Gambhirananda 292). Furthermore, the commentaries exchanged between the 'Vedantin' and the opponent (on the implications of the *sutra*) relate Brahman to the material cause with citations from the Upanishads, illustrating: 'All modifications of gold become known by knowing a piece of gold...All things made of iron become known when a nail-cutter is known' (Gambhirananda 293). In this way, the Upanishadic proposition and illustration are to be understood, to the extent that they reach, as pointing to the material cause.

In the novella, *Siddhartha*, when he is met with the realization of creation as non-distinct from Brahman, means as much the material creation as the efficient.

These are stones which feel like oil or soap, and others like leaves, others like sand, and everyone is special and prays the Om in its own way, each one is Brahman. (132)

Siddhartha's argument, then, runs parallel to the idea that finds expression in the Brahma Sutra. Therefore, when he understands the unity of time, the interconnectedness of every being, and the cyclical nature of life, he also understands that everything sentient and non-sentient possesses the essence of the absolute, is unified in the absolute. As Muller says, 'The true Vedantists always held that behind the relatively real there was the absolutely real, that behind the phenomenal world there was the full reality of Brahman' (70). As in the Brahma Sutra,

It has been said earlier that a kaleidoscopic phenomenal creation can very well stem out from the same Brahman on account of Its being endowed with multifarious powers. (Gambhirananda 358)

Thus, Siddhartha's phenomenal world of stone, tree, river are all pervaded by the divine creative force. For him, even the non-sentient participate in the 'cycle of transformations' (Hesse 131). It carries in itself the potentiality of both sentient and non-sentient aspects of creation. To reiterate, 'this stone is a stone, it is also animal, it is also god, it is also Buddha' (131). Such is his understanding of creation: bound by unity, cyclicity, interconnectedness, and oneness with the Supreme Brahman. On realising this, Siddhartha moves from nescience (*avidya*) towards knowledge (*vidya*). As Govinda observes,

This smile of the mask, this smile of oneness above the flowing forms, this smile of simultaneousness above the thousand births and deaths, this smile of Siddhartha was precisely the same, was precisely of the same kind as the quiet, delicate, impenetrable, perhaps benevolent, perhaps mocking, wise, thousand-fold smile of Gotama, the Buddha, as he had seen it himself with great respect a hundred times. Like this, Govinda knew, the perfected ones are smiling. (137)

Conclusion: Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is a literary masterpiece that brings to the forefront his thematic concerns of unity, interconnectedness, oneness, and the pursuit of absolute truth. While these may not be explicit references to the Brahma Sutra, one cannot disregard their philosophical and spiritual foundations in *Brahman*. In the novella, Siddhartha's

exploration of the ultimate truth is beset with adventures pertaining to the right understanding of the world he participates in. This, he understands, is an exercise in the removal of ignorance achieved through identification with the one Supreme Power. In his own words, 'everything is Brahman' (131), 'each one is Brahman' (132). Following this realisation, we witness the transformative power of embracing Brahman as Siddhartha matures in his understanding of the world; his actions are almost godly, his countenance beset with a 'thousand-fold smile of Gotama' (138) in which Govinda saw 'a flowing river of faces, of hundreds, of thousands, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously' (136). The novella's exploration of the concept of Brahman serves as a guiding theme throughout Siddhartha's journey. Through his experiences and realisations, Siddhartha ultimately grasps the interconnectedness of all things and the unity of the individual self with the universal consciousness, mirroring the essence of Brahman in Hindu philosophy.

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