

The Ecological Path to Self-Realisation: Atmana and Nature in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

¹ Umang Patel² Dr. Falguni P Desai¹ Research Scholar, Shri M.R. Desai Arts & E.E. Laher Kosadia Commerce College, Chikhli, Navsari, Gujarat, India.² Principal, Shri M.R. Desai Arts & E.E. Laher Kosadia Commerce College, Chikhli, Navsari, Gujarat, IndiaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.57067/ir.v2.i10.425>

Abstract: This paper explores the concepts of Indian philosophy and ecocriticism to analyse the portrayal of Atmana Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. It examines how Hesse connects beautiful representation of nature and the spiritual journey of *Siddhartha* with Indian spiritual tradition, especially the concept of Hinduism called Atmana—the essence of the self. The paper shows how *Siddhartha*'s observation and immersion in nature world led him to fundamental lessons of Indian philosophy about Atmana, Dharma and the path to emancipation. In the novel, Hesse uses Indian spiritual traditions to foster a deeper ecological awareness along with the portrayal of Atmana. This ecological awareness refers an individual's connection with the nature which is linked to the knowledge of Atmana. It suggests that spiritual awakening is more than just an event; it's a thorough understanding of oneself and the surroundings. The novel uses symbols of river, forests, and animals to show cyclic nature of life and how everything is connected. The novel shows strong connection between nature and spirituality. It combines the ideas of Indian philosophy and environmental awareness to show that *Siddhartha*'s journey is also inclined to ecology. The paper argues that the concept of Atmana is linked to both philosophical and ecological understanding of the world by creating a unified view of spiritual and environmental consciousness. It is a unique way to look at the novel.

Keywords: Self-Realisation, Nirvana, Atmana, Nature, Enlightenment.

Introduction

The novel, *Siddhartha*, was published after the First World War. Thus, it explores various ways to come out from the disillusionment and psychological crisis of 20th century. The protagonist, *Siddhartha*, goes on a spiritual journey to attain Nirvana, though it goes beyond the traditional interpretations of Buddhism and Hinduism as it refers to deeper concept of Eastern philosophies such as the philosophies of Upanishad and Vedanta. Hesse presents Nirvana as something which isn't about escaping reality but is to engage with life and find personal meaning. The novel addresses the psychological crisis of post-war by combining the Eastern knowledge with the existential crisis of West. As *Siddhartha* moves towards his spiritual fulfilment, Hesse introduces the concepts of Indian Philosophy

such as Atmana, Dharma, and freedom to both Eastern and Western readers.

One of the significant aspects of the novel is that it focuses on ecocritical ideas. It shows Nature as more than just a setting of the novel. It helps *Siddhartha* to attain Nirvana at the end. Hesse combines more ecological ideas with fundamental philosophical belief that all lives are connected. It is shown through different imagery of river, forests and natural cycles. It suggests that the enlightenment must be attained through the understanding of the outside world. One should not isolate himself from it. In the novel, *Siddhartha*'s spiritual awakening only in natural settings, which depicts the balance between the understanding of inner self and outer world.

Hesse's understanding of the concept of Nirvana is influenced by his own transition from Christianity to Eastern philosophy. His

rejection of conventional Christian ideas is the result of existential crisis the Europe was facing in the aftermath of World War I, and Siddhartha is the reaction to it. It provides a way to self-discovery that is inclusive and global. By combining Eastern philosophy and ecological awareness.

From Nirvana to Atmana: Spiritual Evolution in Siddhartha

From Materialistic Desires to Inner Wisdom: Siddhartha's Path of Enlightenment

The protagonist, Siddhartha goes on a spiritual journey that has three particular phases. Each phase is a significant step towards the enlightenment.

Spiritual Path

Siddhartha is introduced in the novel as a youthful Brahmin who is respected for his brilliance and promise: "he was a source of joy for everyone" (Hesse 11). Despite the admiration, Siddhartha feels an unshakable dissatisfaction, reflecting that "Siddhartha was not a source of joy for himself, he found no delight in himself" (Hesse 11). Even though Siddhartha is committed to following the Brahmins' teachings and practices, he is agitated because he feels that the knowledge his teachers have given him is not enough to experience the Atmana, the universal spirit, nobody knew it, not the father, and not the teachers and wise men" (Hesse 12). He questions the limitations of his teachings, asking himself, "Where was Atmana to be found, where did He reside, where did his eternal heartbeat, where else but in one's self, in its innermost part?" (Hesse 12). Though the

Brahmins possess extensive knowledge, they lack an understanding of "the most important thing", the lived experience of Atmana. This drives Siddhartha to leave his home in search of deeper spiritual fulfilment (Hesse 13). When Siddhartha joins the Samanas, an ascetic group that practises self-denial to obtain enlightenment, the next chapter of his journey begins. He picks up their techniques fast, but he soon becomes discouraged and starts to doubt their efficacy: "How do you think we did progress? Did we reach any goals?" (Hesse 24). Siddhartha compares the transient comfort that asceticism brings with the transient comfort the way "a drunkard does whenever he drinks wine" (Hesse 24). After realising the Samanas' route has its limitations, Siddhartha continues his quest for deeper answers. The next pursuit for Siddhartha is to meet Gautama, the Buddha, whose teachings have influenced many people, including Govinda, his friend. Siddhartha discovers flaws in the Buddha's teachings, but Govinda decides to follow him. He acknowledges the Buddha's enlightenment but believes that through words he "will not be able to convey to anybody... in words and through teachings, what has happened to you in the hour of enlightenment!" (Hesse 42). This insight affirms Siddhartha's belief that no external teacher can lead him to enlightenment. Convinced that "no teachings will entice me anymore", Siddhartha sets off on his own path (Hesse 43).

Materialistic Path

During the second part of his journey, Siddhartha enters the material world and meets

three important people: the ferryman who helps him to cross the river, Kamaswami, a merchant, and Kamala, a courtesan. If Siddhartha can show that he can survive in the material world, Kamala will educate him about love and its customs. With Kamaswami's help, Siddhartha learns "to trade, to use his power over people, to enjoy himself with a woman... to eat tenderly and carefully prepared food" (Hesse 85). At first, Siddhartha sees life as a game, ignoring the wants of others around him and treating them "with some mockery" (Hesse 85). However, over time, he entangles in the very desires he once rejected, succumbing to "rage and passion" (Hesse 87). He begins to lose his detachment and sees that the material world is ultimately meaningless and empty. He realises after this introspection that his life of luxury is meaningless, much like the ascetic lifestyle he before led.

The Enlightenment

Towards the end of his journey, Siddhartha makes his way back to the river, a representation of continuity and knowledge. Vasudeva, the ferryman who had assisted him in crossing the river, re-connects with him. Siddhartha learns to listen to the river from Vasudeva, who reveals the eternal essence of life. The river teaches him that "there is only the present," and that all things are interconnected (Hesse 115). Through this, Siddhartha learns to embrace the present moment and realises that life, like the river, is ever-changing yet timeless. The river reveals to Siddhartha that although the external self changes, the inner self does not; this helps him grasp the self (Atmana). He listens to the river

whenever he has questions or doubts and with the passage of time, he reaches his divine destination. Vasudeva explains that the river "is everywhere at once" (Hesse 115), symbolising the unity of all existence. This revelation leads Siddhartha to recognize that his inner self transcends the physical world, allowing him to embrace life's wholeness. Siddhartha's comprehension of love and sorrow is further enhanced by his bond with his son. Siddhartha is left to care for their kid after Kamala passes away, but the boy soon grows resentful of him and flees. Siddhartha's love for his son causes him great pain, but it also teaches him the importance of letting go. As Vasudeva reminds him "that you had committed your foolish acts in order to spare your son from committing them too?" (Hesse 129). This acceptance allows Siddhartha to come to terms with the cycle of life, understanding that love and suffering are inseparable parts of the human experience.

Eventually, Siddhartha attains enlightenment through the teachings of the river. He realises that all aspects of life, both joy and suffering, are part of a greater whole. As he watches the river, he sees images of his loved ones merging into its flow, symbolising the interconnectedness of all life. The voices of the river eventually merge into a harmonious "Om," representing the unity and perfection of existence. Siddhartha embraces the idea that life is cyclical, with no true beginning or end, and that all forms are interconnected. By the end of the novel, Hesse rejects the concept of Nirvana as an absolute state, suggesting instead that it is merely an idea. Siddhartha concludes that "there is nothing which would

be Nirvana, there is just the word Nirvana” (Hesse 154). He asserts that “knowledge can be conveyed, but not wisdom”, reinforcing the novel’s central theme that enlightenment cannot be taught but must be discovered within. Siddhartha’s quest is essentially one of self-discovery (Hesse 150). He discovers that genuine wisdom must be realised from inside and cannot be obtained through external instruction or worldly endeavours. He reaches a condition of calm and acceptance at the end of his spiritual journey, symbolised by the river, as a result of his ultimate realisation of the interconnectedness of all life.

The Awakening of the True Self: Siddhartha’s Realisation of Atmana

Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha explores in great depth the Hindu concept of Atmana, the eternal self or soul, which forms the basis of Siddhartha’s quest for enlightenment. The text incorporates several significant Hindu philosophical concepts, major among them being the idea that the Atmana, or the innermost self, is “self”, ‘inner self’ or something less physical such as the “core of individual identity” (Panyalertsinpaisarn). It is the secret to breaking free from the cycle of birth and rebirth and is everlasting and unchangeable. The journey of Siddhartha reflects the core Vedantic idea that realising and attaining the Atmana is the ultimate purpose of life, a knowledge that cannot be imparted but must be discovered via one’s own inner experience. At the start of the novel, Siddhartha’s internal conflict and dissatisfaction with the Brahmins’ teachings symbolise the Hindu concept that true spiritual fulfilment cannot be gained by

only intellectual understanding of the scriptures, such as the Vedas or Upanishads. Despite being surrounded by teachers and sages who discuss the Atmana without teaching Siddhartha how to experience it himself, Siddhartha remains unsatisfied. This frustration is evident when he questions, “Where was Atmana to be found, where did He reside, where else but in one’s self, in its innermost part?” (Hesse 12). In the end, the Upanishads’ teachings—which emphasise that the Atmana is inherent in every person and must be sought through self-reflection and self-realisation—are congruent with Siddhartha’s conclusion that the Atmana is an internal reality. This implies that every person possesses the divine Atmana, and that the path to enlightenment is through acknowledging this connection between the self and the universe. It parallels the well-known teaching from the Chandogya Upanishad, “Tat tvam asi (Thou art that)” (Das).

Siddhartha understood that no external teacher or scripture could bring him to enlightenment, as evidenced by his eventual rejection of the Brahmin teachings and his departure from the Samanas to follow his own path. His realisation that the Atmana’s knowledge cannot be expressed in words is similar to the Hindu notion that ultimate truth is only experienced firsthand and is beyond the realm of intellect. This reflects the Advaita Vedanta school of thought, expounded by Adi Shankaracharya, which holds that the concept of duality—believing that one is distinct from Brahman, the universal soul—is an illusion caused by “ignorance (avidyā)” (“Adi Shankara”). Siddhartha realises this when he

considers how even the Buddha, and his teachings are “invaded by something alien” (Hesse 40). He concludes that “you will not be able to convey to anybody... in words and through teachings, what has happened to you in the hour of enlightenment!” (Hesse 42). Shankara’s teachings, according to which liberation can only come from a direct understanding of the union between Brahman and Atmana, are in line with this rejection of outside instruction.

As Siddhartha continues his journey, significant principles of Hindu philosophy concerning the illusory nature of the material world (*maya*) are also reflected in his engagement in the material world and consequent regret. Hinduism views attachment to worldly goals and sense experiences as a barrier to realising one’s true nature, or Atmana. During his time with Kamala and Kamaswami, Siddhartha indulged in money, sexual pleasure, and worldly achievement, which is a reflection of the Hindu belief that these pursuits ultimately divert attention from realising one’s inner self, or Atmana. His eventual realisation that his existence has become “a game gradually transforming into rage and passion”, which makes him disgusted with his materialistic way of living, recalls the Hindu belief that attachment to the temporary, ephemeral parts of life results in sorrow and imprisonment in *samsara* (Hesse 87). Siddhartha’s quest for a deeper meaning is driven by this revelation, which is consistent with the Hindu belief that liberation can only be attained by turning inward towards the eternal self and transcending materialistic wants.

The river, a metaphor for the unity and continuity of life, is the deepest symbol of Siddhartha’s inner journey towards discovering the Atmana. It is similar to the Hindu notion of Brahman, the eternal, infinite truth. The river’s constant flow, which is both ever-present and ever-changing, represents the everlasting nature of the self and the interconnection of all things. After Siddhartha learns from the river and listens to it, he starts to see that although existence is a constant cycle of change, there is an eternal, unchanging reality under the surface. This realisation is closely related to the Hindu concept of the Atmana. The river teaches Siddhartha that “there is only the present”, emphasising the idea that the eternal Atmana exists beyond time, beyond the dualities of past and future, much like the Brahman of the Advaita Vedanta tradition (Hesse 115).

When Vasudeva, the ferryman, says that the river “is everywhere at once,” it further supports the idea that the Atmana is transcendent and eternal (Hesse 115). This reflects the Upanishadic doctrine that the Atmana transcends time and space and permeates all entities. The merging voices of the river into a harmonious ‘Om,’ representing Siddhartha’s awareness of the unity of all existence, is a reflection of Advaita Vedanta’s non-dual philosophy, which holds that the individual self (Atmana) and the universal reality (Brahman) are ultimately one. Symbolising the oneness of existence and the understanding that all beings are interconnected through the Atmana, Siddhartha feels the unity of all living forms—his father, son, Kamala, and Govinda—all

merging into the endless flow of the river at this moment.

Hindu philosophy holds that to realise the Atmana, one must transcend the fundamental qualities of human experience, love and suffering, which Siddhartha's struggles with his son further illuminate. According to Hindu philosophy, the suffering resulting from interactions with loved ones and attachment to them is a part of the cyclical nature of birth and reincarnation. Hence, he "stops looking for his son and returns to Vasudeva the ferryman and living by the side of the river finds solace and spends the rest of his days ferrying people across the waters" (Kumari). Siddhartha's insight that his child has to pursue his own way, just like him, is reminiscent of the Hindu concept that every (Atmana) has its own road to enlightenment and is independent of others. His anguish for his son's leaving broadens his empathy and strengthens his bond with people, which helps him comprehend the Atmana—which is beyond happiness and sorrow—more fully.

The Hindu concept of the "cyclical existence" ("Samsara") is reflected in Siddhartha's awareness at the end of the book that all facets of life—birth, death, sorrow, and joy—are a part of a bigger whole. At the end, Siddhartha realises that all existence is one and accepts that happiness and sorrow are a part of the same everlasting cycle. He also realises that "nonduality (advaita) is the only final truth" ("Advaita").

His rejection of the concept of Nirvana as a separate, absolute state— "there is nothing which would be Nirvana, there is just the word Nirvana" (Hesse 154)—further emphasises the

novel's alignment with Hindu philosophy, which teaches that moksha (liberation) is not a state to be attained but rather the realisation of the eternal unity of "the individual self (Atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman)" (Singh 143).

In a nutshell, through Siddhartha's path of self-realisation, Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha strongly mirrors the Hindu notion of Atmana. The main principles of Advaita Vedanta, which hold that realising the Atmana is the path to spiritual freedom, reflected in his rejection of other teachings, his struggles with the material world, and his final comprehension of the unity of life through the metaphor of the river. In line with the Hindu notion that true wisdom is the realisation of the Atmana within, Siddhartha's enlightenment results from his direct experience of the eternal, unchanging self rather than from academic knowledge or outside instruction.

The Role of Nature in Siddhartha's Spiritual Journey

In Siddhartha, the river that contains "the secret of life" helps the protagonist on his way to enlightenment by acting as a mentor and teacher (Khadam 359). An ecocritical point of view holds that Siddhartha learns from nature rather than from human teachers, demonstrating a deep ecological consciousness in the connection between spiritual growth and the natural world. His spiritual journey centres on nature, which stands for interconnectedness, temporariness, and balance—fundamental ecological concepts deeply embedded in Buddhist and Vedantic Indian thought.

The novel's most notable symbol, the river, represents the notion that the natural world is a living, spiritual force that can transmit wisdom. Siddhartha's association with the river plays a crucial role in his eventual realisation of the cyclical nature of existence, the unity of all things, and the passage of time. This insight is consistent with ecological theories of nature, which hold that "everything is interconnected with everyone" (Podder 9). Siddhartha's spiritual awakening takes place in unison with nature rather than in isolation from it, demonstrating how nature serves as the key to unlocking his comprehension of the universe.

Siddhartha first loses his connection to nature and the spiritual truths he sought from human teachers, including the Brahmins, the Samanas, and even the Buddha, as he involves himself in the worldly world and gives up his early spiritual aspirations. When he is at the verge of suicide beside the river, the sound of 'Om,' which he hears coming from the river itself, saves him instead of human intervention. Since it signifies Siddhartha's spiritual rebirth, this is a crucial moment. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the sound 'Om' is considered sacred and "signifies the oneness and unity of all things" (Thaker 16). It also reflects the connectivity of the universe. Siddhartha discovers that the wisdom he has been seeking is inherent in the natural world and inside himself, not something external that can be found in religious teachings or beliefs, after hearing this sound in the river.

From the river, Siddhartha learns to view life as a constant flow that is both constantly changing and always the same, just like the

water that flows through it that shows nothing is permanent and everything is always changing, is reflected in the river's movement. The river teaches Siddhartha that time is cyclical, with the past, present, and future all existing as a part of the same everlasting flow, rather than linear, as he had previously thought. A crucial aspect of Siddhartha's spiritual awakening is his realisation that time is a continuous, interrelated whole. This realisation is closely related to ecological concepts of the life-cycles-death-rebirth cycle. Siddhartha's realisation is reinforced by his interaction with Vasudeva, the ferryman, who symbolises the wisdom of nature. Instead of providing Siddhartha with clear instructions, Vasudeva encourages him to pay attention to the river. With the help of this mentor, Siddhartha discovers that the natural world is the source of all knowledge and that genuine wisdom can only be encountered by intimate contact with the natural world rather than through words or doctrines. Being a conduit for nature's lessons, Vasudeva emphasises the ecocritical notion that enlightenment originates from attunement to the rhythms and patterns of the natural world rather than from human knowledge, playing his role as a guide unique.

Siddhartha comes to accept the notion that life is ever evolving and in continual flow as he listens to the river. The river demonstrates to him the interconnectedness of all things and the fact that all aspects of life, including joy and misery, birth and death, are a part of one endless cycle. Siddhartha's comprehension of the essence of life is largely dependent on this ecological realisation. The eternal 'now,'

where all times exist together and the past, present, and future unite into one, is symbolised by the river's movement. Siddhartha learns from this that the Atmana, is not separate from the outer world but is part of a whole.

The river too shows the interdependency of living things on each other. It aligns with the Vedantic idea that all living beings are part of a larger cosmic order. It also says that the nature is divine. When Siddhartha sees the faces of his father, Govinda, Kamala, his son, the faces merged into the river now of his enlightenment. It makes him feel more connected with them. This perspective shows that one doesn't separate himself from the people but all living beings are part of the flow of this universe. This understanding plays a vital role in the protagonist's spiritual awakening. It shows that humans and nature depend on each other.

Siddhartha's relationship with his son teaches him a lesson about nature's cycles. When Siddhartha tries to control his son's path, he leaves him. He feels great pain of separation. But the river helps him learn to let go. Siddhartha learns that like him, his son must find his own way in life. This knowledge aligns closely with the ecological principle of letting the life unfold on its naturally. It shouldn't be controlled. From the river, he learns that all living beings must find and follow their own path.

Towards the end of Siddhartha's journey, the river takes on a supreme symbolic meaning of ecological equilibrium and spiritual knowledge. Siddhartha observes the river and hears its numerous voices—voices of pleasure,

sorrow, birth, and death—combine into the soothing sound of 'Om.' This epiphany signifies Siddhartha's enlightenment, when he at last realises that all facets of existence—positive and negative—are a part of one cohesive whole. Siddhartha learns from the river that all kinds of life are interrelated and that life is a cycle with no real start or end.

Conclusion

Hesse creates Siddhartha philosophically and ecologically significant by blending Indian spiritual traditions, notably the concept of Atmana with deep ecological awareness. The novel depicts the nature not just as a backdrop of the novel but active participant in the Siddhartha's journey of self-realisation. Rivers, forests, animals, and nature's cycles are all important symbols for Siddhartha's path to enlightenment because they show how all living things are linked. These natural elements represent the idea of Atmana's unity and continuity. They also show how self-realisation and knowing one's place are connected in the larger ecological system.

Indian philosophical concepts mostly found in Buddhism and Hinduism, are closely connected to Hesse's depiction of Siddhartha's growing connection with nature. The journey to reaching Atmana is happening simultaneously with Siddhartha's growing sensitivity towards natural world. First his rejection of world and then its acceptance is resembled to Hindu concept of Dharma, essential for spiritual development, which has the connection to outer world. The constantly evolving cycles of development, destruction and rebirth is found in nature. It is a constant

reminder of how fleeting the life is but intricately linked. Siddhartha's enlightenment comes from a deeper knowledge that Atmana is both separable and inseparable from the universe.

The novel considers nature as a significant element for spiritual enlightenment. According to Hesse, the environment has a significant impact on the spiritual journey. The events and the connections in the novel lead to Siddhartha's spiritual enlightenment are found in the nature. Siddhartha's spiritual journey gives more universal view of life which is beyond human centric spirituality. All forms of life are interconnected. It highlights the cyclic nature of existence. It also supports the idea that when one realises his connection with the universe, it is his first step towards spiritual enlightenment.

In the novel, Hesse combines Indian spiritual concepts with ecological awareness and through the journey of Siddhartha shows spiritual development both inwardly and outwardly. This dual approach fosters the protagonist's understanding, and it opens the possible conversations between spirituality and ecology. Siddhartha emphasises the role of ecological awareness in spiritual awareness by arguing that to understand oneself, the healthy relationship with the nature is needed. The novel is an eternal reflection of how everything is connected.

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