

Rethinking Ziolkowski's "Landscape of the Soul:"

A Mahayana Buddhist Interpretation of *Siddhartha*

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Introduction

One reason the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse has enjoyed such great success and lasting intrigue is its allowance for multiple interpretations. Like many timeless works of literature it also encourages new interpretations for subsequent generations and for cross-cultural audiences worldwide. Something about the spiritual struggle portrayed in *Siddhartha* resonates strongly with readers from all religious beliefs. Though the story is set in a Hindu/Buddhist context, members of every religious group and individuals alike can find special meanings that resonate with their own tradition and/or personal worldview. Regardless of Hesse's own intentions (if that can even be determined), no single interpretation is more valid than the next. Scholars, however, play a dubious role as the professional interpreter, in which they attempt to look at the author's works, style, and biographical history to offer an intellectual understanding of what the writer is trying to express. Hidden underneath the professional voice, however, lies another more subjective voice. The voice which has grown up with a distinct religio-cultural worldview. Although scholars strive for objectivity in their professional work, it is impossible to completely suppress the inner interpreter that subtly shapes and flavors their work. Most of the time the subjective in academia is endurable, or innocent enough to gloss over. However, as a

novice to the academic interpretation devoted to *Siddhartha*, I was overcome with a foul taste of gross subjection. My initial thought was thus: Did all the Christian theologians leave the divinity schools to enter Hesse scholarship? As I continued to read in disbelief, the initial thought I was trying to dissolve unfortunately took a clearer and stronger form. Are these scholars actually using Hesse's *Siddhartha* as a means to suggest that Christianity is the true path? The most explicit use of this tactic is displayed when interpreting Siddhartha's final revelation. Even if some scholars include a Taoist interpretation of Siddhartha's transformation, they will be sure to highlight the Christian one first. For example, Eugene Stelzig states:

In any event, after rejecting the suicidal impulse that Klein succumbed to, Siddhartha experiences yet another "awakening" to a higher self. Now the metaphor is literalized as he wakes up from a deep and healing sleep to a new awareness synonymous with the basic message of Christianity: 'he loved everything, he was full of joyous love towards everything he saw. And it seemed to him that was just why he was previously ill – because he could love nothing and nobody.' Cured of his self-hatred and despair, Siddhartha has become again "like a small child" and is ready, like the dying Klein, to enter into the kingdom of heaven – or, to invoke the Chinese equivalent that is just as relevant to the last third of *Siddhartha*, into the mystery of the Tao.¹

Stelzig, like many other scholars, relegates some justification to other religious/philosophical frameworks that can provide meaning to Siddhartha's epiphany. Yet, Theodore Ziolkowski seems to put most of his confidence in the Christian revelation of the novel. He writes:

Then his reunification with the All at the end of the book corresponds to the miraculous union with God in Christian legends. As in Christian canonization trials, his saintliness must be attested by witnesses: namely, Vasudeva, Kamala, and Govinda, all of whom recognize in his face the aspect of godliness and repose.²

When scholars emphasize Siddhartha's Christian realization, they usually refer to Hesse's essay *My Belief*, where he writes, "The fact that my Siddhartha puts not knowledge but love ahead of everything, that he rejects dogma and makes the experience of unity point, may be interpreted as a swing back toward Christianity, yes, as a truly Protestant characteristic."³ The critical word in

this quote often overlooked is ‘may.’ True, it very well could be interpreted in this manner, but it may also be interpreted in numerous ways. Since this enlightenment is immersed within the concepts of totality and simultaneity, categorizing it under any religious or philosophical system immediately detracts from its essence. My point here is not to condemn the scholars who interpret Siddhartha’s epiphany as a Christian revelation, for that is the beauty of *Siddhartha*; the story can be interpreted in endless fashions. What I am concerned with is scholars who reject other interpretations and proffer their ideas as gospel. In his essay “The Landscape of the Soul,” Theodore Ziolkowski clearly undermines the spirit of *Siddhartha*. Much of Ziolkowski’s work is quite interesting. His interpretations of the three parts, the iterative-durative style, and the projection of Siddhartha’s struggle onto the landscape are insightful and well expressed. Yet underlying the whole essay is Ziolkowski’s assertion that the essence of the novel is Hesse’s rejection of Buddhism. Ziolkowski writes:

Thus the highest lesson of the novel is a direct contradiction of Buddha’s theory of the Eightfold Path, to which, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Hesse objected in his diary of 1920; it is the whole meaning of the book that Siddhartha can attain the Buddha’s goal without following his path. If rejection of that doctrine is the essence of the novel, then it is futile to look to Buddhism for clues to the organizational structure of the book.⁴

It is evident that Ziolkowski is defending his proposition of the novel’s three part structure: four chapters before Siddhartha crosses the river, four chapters after he crosses the river, and four on the river. Ziolkowski, in “Landscape of the Soul,” argues against scholars such as Leroy R. Shaw who claim the novel to be structured on the Buddhist doctrines of the four noble truths (chap. 1-4) and eight-fold path (5-12). Ziolkowski’s argument for interpreting the organizational structure as three parts rather than based on the four noble truths and eight-fold path is sound but I feel he takes his point to an erroneous and brazen level. Is the rejection of Buddhism really the essence of the novel? Should we disregard Buddhism entirely for interpretive clues to the

organization structure of the book? Although I personally do not find Leroy R. Shaw's organizational structure very compelling, it does not negate all possible Buddhist interpretations. In this paper I will demonstrate that *Siddhartha's* essence does not lie in Hesse's rejection of Buddhism. Rather, *Siddhartha's* enlightenment can be interpreted as an affirmation of Buddhist doctrine and many possible Buddhist interpretations of its structure can be delineated.

Getting Beyond the Four Noble Truths

When scholars, such as Ziolkowski, interpret Siddhartha's enlightenment at the end of the novel, it is unfortunate that most do not recognize the inherently Buddhist conclusion. Sure, the ending (as Hesse stated) "may" be seen as a Christian revelation, but it "may" also be interpreted as a distinctly Buddhist enlightenment. The concepts of the totality and simultaneity of all things and love towards all beings are the underlying ideas behind most of the Mahayana forms of Buddhism. Ideologically, the four noble truths and eight-fold path are the initial concepts one learns when introduced to conservative Buddhism. Pejoratively labeled the Hinayana (lesser vehicle) by the Mahayana (great vehicle), the schools of conservative Buddhism adhere closely to the spoken words of the Buddha. These teachings encompass the Buddha's early sermons on the four noble truths and eight-fold path. The world is viewed as divided into samsara and nirvana, and the goal of the Buddhist practitioner is to permanently escape samsara through following the regimented eight-fold path. Samsara refers to the cycle of existence into which all sentient beings are repeatedly reborn, while nirvana suggests a complete extinguishing of the cycle and is characterized by permanent bliss. Hesse appears to be clearly familiar with these teachings and with conservative Buddhism as a whole. His knowledge of the life of the Buddha and his early sermons is evident from the story of *Siddhartha*. Yet, how much did Hesse know about other developments in Buddhism? From his writings in *My Belief*, Hesse does not seem to

be familiar with the Buddhist concepts of emptiness and non-duality, which are the focal points of the Mahayana schools. There is no mention of the compassionate love that arises out of experientially realizing the emptiness of all phenomena. Hesse makes no reference to Hua-yen Buddhism, which advances the concept of the interpenetration of all phenomena, a philosophy that resounds particularly close to Siddhartha's realization. If Hesse was not familiar with the Mahayana teachings, and it's merely a coincidence that Siddhartha's revelation parallels so many of its basic concepts, then why should one bother looking to the Mahayana for interpretive clues to its structure and meaning? I believe this is an important exercise for three reasons. First, Hesse's exact knowledge of Mahayana Buddhism is unclear. Although it is unlikely, Hesse may have been familiar with some Mahayana concepts and intentionally or subconsciously worked them into the structure and meaning of the novel. Secondly, if Hesse was completely unfamiliar with the Mahayana, it is fascinating that Siddhartha's spiritual progression parallels the historic development of Buddhism. Finally, by examining Mahayana Buddhism we may uncover some clues as to why *Siddhartha* was so popular in the East. Was it a particularly Christian message that made this novel so popular in the East, or a beautifully expressed vision of their own religious worldview with which they connected? As I suggested in the introduction, *Siddhartha* can be interpreted in endless fashions according to the religio-cultural worldview of the reader. Acquaintance with the concepts of Mahayana Buddhism will hopefully provide greater insight into other cultures appreciation of the novel.

Mahayana Buddhism

Due to the vast scope of Mahayana Buddhism there is no way to convey its doctrines and practices without great generalization and over simplification. For the purposes of this paper, however, I believe this segment will prove sufficient in showing the parallels between Mahayana

concepts and Siddhartha's journey and enlightenment. Dating the actual beginnings of the Mahayana is a greatly debated topic in Buddhist scholarship. Though some accounts mark its beginnings within just a hundred years of the Buddha's death, by the first century of the Common Era the movement is flourishing. While conservative Buddhist schools continued to exist in India with the Mahayana, it was the latter that would successfully spread into China in the 2nd century c.e. Conservative Buddhism, often referred to as Hinayana, Southern, or in particular Theravada Buddhism would spread to Southeast Asia and is still the prevalent form of Buddhism found today in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. One of the major paradigm switches central to the Mahayana view was the focus on the bodhisattva path. The goal of conservative Buddhism is to become an arhat. An arhat is one who has ended the cycle of rebirth due to the clearing of mental obscurations connected with the realization that no inherent self or 'I' exists. The arhat has attained permanent bliss for herself and upon death will never again be part of this samsaric existence. In the Mahayana, the goal is no longer to become an arhat, but to attain buddhahood. The bodhisattva forgoes her own personal nirvana, continually reborn into this samsaric existence in order to help all living beings end suffering and attain nirvana.

The motivating concept that engenders the bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings from samsara, as well as being the ideological backbone of the Mahayana is the concept of emptiness. The greatest formalizer of emptiness doctrine was Nagarjuna, a 2nd century Buddhist philosopher. In his *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna painstakingly examines the nature of all phenomena to illustrate that they are empty. That is to say, all phenomena are empty of an inherent existence and are invariably dependent upon causes and conditions. Nagarjuna's dialectic negation follows that you cannot say anything exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, and neither exists nor does not exist. He refers to this as the emptiness

of views. If a practitioner is stuck in any of these views, he is stuck in samsara. Transcending these four views is equated with emptiness, which is equated with ultimate reality. It is important to keep in mind that Nagarjuna is not arguing that things do not completely exist but that they do not exist as independent, unchanging, permanent phenomena. To elucidate this premise he speaks of two levels of truth: conventional and ultimate. For example, the computer I am currently using and the table on which it rests exist conventionally, but ultimately there is nothing one can distinguish as the inherent essence of either the computer or table. Nagarjuna's examination of emptiness does not stop with the Buddhist teachings or the Buddha himself, for it is the very point of the Mahayana that the Buddhist teachings themselves are empty. Here within lies the great disparity between conservative and Mahayana Buddhism. In conservative Buddhist terminology, nirvana is a permanent transformation from samsaric existence attained by a realization of the emptiness of self. Whereas, in the Mahayana, nirvana is a complete transcendence of the dualistic views of nirvana and samsara attained by a realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. The Mahayana schools do not disregard the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths and eight-fold path as untrue, but merely as conventionally true. Concomitant to the concept of emptiness is the Mahayana's emphasis on non-duality. Since all phenomena are empty of inherent existence it follows that all dualistic notions must be abandoned to realize the doctrine of emptiness. For example, samsara is empty of inherent existence; it is dependent upon the concept of nirvana. Therefore, in Mahayana terminology, samsara is nirvana. This idea extends to any duality conceivable, male is female, impurity is purity, life is death. The most cited Mahayana creed which succinctly summarizes the theory of non-duality is expressed in the *Heart Sutra*. "Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness is itself form."⁵

Although one may be able to intellectually grasp this concept of emptiness and non-duality, it is the experiential realization of emptiness and non-duality of all phenomena that induces one to attain the perfect, unsurpassed enlightenment of the bodhisattvas. Through this realization of emptiness a great compassionate love for all sentient and non-sentient beings emerges in the bodhisattvas. Thus the two wings of the bodhisattva, wisdom and compassion, should be understood within this non-dualistic structure. The wisdom attained from the realization of emptiness is none other than compassionate love for all beings, and this compassion is none other than the wisdom attained by the realization of emptiness. Wisdom is compassion; compassion is wisdom. Hence, the Mahayana sutras are not used as instructive teachings to convey the traditional sayings of the Buddha, but rather are used as transformative devices to help practitioners realize the emptiness and non-duality of all dharmas. There is no single method used to attain the realization of emptiness. Each cultivator must attain her own enlightenment through one of an infinite number of dharma doors. A dharma door within Mahayana Buddhism is a simple term used to describe any technique for propelling the realization of emptiness. Thus, in the case of Siddhartha, one might say that he tried the dharma doors of bodily privation and sensual love, but it was the dharma door of the timeless river that finally propelled his enlightenment.

Another important concept in Mahayana Buddhism that is heavily utilized in the Mahayana sutras is skillful means. Skillful means, expedient means, or liberative technique all come from the same root, the Sanskrit word Upaya meaning ‘device, stratagem,’ or ‘means.’ According to Bhiksuni Heng Yin, a contemporary Buddhist monk, “Because beings suffer from countless illnesses and afflictions, each not the same, the Buddha taught countless dharma methods to cure them. This ability to meet the needs of living beings in leading them to

enlightenment is called Skillful Means.”⁶ Commenting on the Sixth Patriarch’s masterful use of skillful means, Heng Yin explains, “The Great Master simply taught men how to break their attachments and set themselves free.”⁷ According to the Mahayana, the historical Buddha was a true master of skillful means. I mentioned earlier that the Mahayana did not discount the original teachings of the Buddha as untrue, but as conventionally true. The *Lotus Sutra* explains that the early sermons of the Buddha were taught out of skillful means. Due to the Buddha’s skill in liberative technique, he realized that if he initially tried to explain the ultimate meaning of his enlightenment that no one would understand. So, instead, he expounded on the four noble truths and eight-fold path to help living beings engage his philosophy before expounding on the profounder realm of emptiness. In fact, all of the Buddha’s teachings are accepted as skillful means, the Mahayana teachings as well. These sutras are nothing more than devices to help elucidate and facilitate the realization of emptiness. The practice of skillful means is paramount in executing the bodhisattvas’ vow to help all beings end suffering and attain enlightenment. Although a highly realized bodhisattva may have experienced the realm of emptiness, without great skill in liberative technique he will not attain buddhahood.

The final concept of Mahayana Buddhism that I will discuss is buddha nature. The discourse on buddha nature functions as a response to the idea that ultimate reality is purely emptiness. To combat this notion of ultimate reality as purely empty with no other qualities the Buddha taught that ultimate reality has a luminous quality as well. Moreover, this combination of emptiness and luminosity is none other than the essence of enlightenment itself, the buddha nature. Buddha nature doctrine posits that all sentient beings possess and have always possessed a buddha nature. In reality, all beings possess the same enlightened mind of a buddha, but a buddha has cleared away all the obscurations that previously prevented her from its realization.

Therefore, ultimate reality is not something to be attained but discovered through dusting off the luminous buddha nature. Now that the major concepts of Mahayana Buddhism have been outlined I can briefly discuss one common terminology used within the school to systemize the teachings: The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. The Mahayana explained that the teachings of the Buddha can be viewed as coming forth in the three great turnings of the dharma wheel. The First Turning was the Buddha's early sermon on the four noble truths and eight-fold path. The Second Turning was highlighted by the Buddha's teaching on emptiness. And finally, the Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel was expressed in the Buddha's discourse on buddha nature.

To better appreciate the concepts of Mahayana Buddhism, it is beneficial to see how the Mahayana utilized them within the sutras. Two Mahayana sutras that will help illustrate the concepts of emptiness, non-duality, and skillful means are *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* and the *Gandavyuha* or *Entry into the Realm of Reality*. *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* is a great sutra to read as an introduction to the concepts and profundities of the Mahayana tradition. It is shorter than most Mahayana sutras and concentrates on unpacking the central concepts of emptiness and non-duality through a semi-intellectual manner. Like Hesse's novels, there are many levels of narrative taking place, and perhaps more than reading between the lines, the ultimate reading of the Mahayana sutras is through transcending the lines altogether.

Vimalakirti is a highly realized bodhisattva renown for his great skill in liberative technique (skillful means). As the passage below indicates, he is not a celibate monk who spends his whole day in meditation and practicing austerities, but lives as a householder within a great city in the midst of all worldly activities.

At that time, there lived in the great city of Vaisali a certain Licchavi,
Vimalakirti by name...He had penetrated the profound way of the Dharma. He

was liberated through the transcendence of wisdom. Having integrated this realization with skill in liberative technique, he was expert in knowing the thoughts and actions of living beings...In order to develop living beings with his skill in liberative technique, he lived in the great city of Vaisali.

He wore the white clothes of the layman, yet lived impeccably like a religious devotee. He lived at home, but remained aloof from the realm of desire, the realm of pure matter, and the immaterial realm. He had a son, a wife, and female attendants, yet always maintained continence. He appeared to be surrounded by servants, yet lived in solitude...He seemed to eat and drink, yet always took nourishment from the taste of meditation.

He was honored as the businessman among businessmen because he demonstrated the priority of the Dharma. He was honored as the landlord among landlords because he renounced the aggressiveness of ownership. He was honored as the warrior among warriors because he cultivated endurance, determination, and fortitude. He was honored as the aristocrat among aristocrats because he suppressed pride, vanity, and arrogance....He was honored as the prince of princes because he reversed their attachment to royal pleasures and sovereign power. He was honored as a eunuch in the royal harem because he taught the young ladies according to the dharma.

Thus lived the Licchavi Vimalakirti in the great city of Vaisali, endowed with an infinite knowledge of skill in liberative techniques.⁸

The main points expressed in this introduction are continual themes that run throughout the sutra. Specifically, one does not have to be a monk to be a highly realized bodhisattva, one can live within the world without being attached to it, buddha dharma can be expressed in supposedly mundane activities, and the non-duality of all these expressions. Ultimately there are no dualistic notions between monk and layman, mundane world and spiritual world, mundane activities and spiritual ones. Vimalakirti has transcended all these notions and simply works to help free all beings from views by knowing which methods will best suit each practitioner. Vimalakirti's first expedient device is to feign sickness in order to bring unto his house a great audience that includes thousands of arhats and bodhisattvas. In the following chapters many devices are used to awaken the realization of emptiness and non-duality in Vimalakirti's guests. In chapter nine, "The Dharma-Door of Non-duality," many bodhisattvas offer insights as to how they realized the

door of non-duality. This is a common device utilized in the Mahayana sutras, it is often not the historical Buddha but the bodhisattvas who relate varying accounts of how they realized the emptiness of a certain dharma. For example:

The bodhisattva Simhamati declared, To say, this is impure and this is immaculate makes for duality. One who, attaining equanimity, forms no conception of impurity or immaculateness, yet is not utterly without conceptions without conceptions, has equanimity without any attainment of equanimity – he enters the absence of conceptual knots. Thus, he enters into non-duality.

The bodhisattva Sudhadhimukti declared, To say, This is happiness and That is misery is dualism. One who is free of all calculations, through the extreme purity of gnosis –his mind is aloof, like empty space; and thus he enters non-duality.

The bodhisattva Santendriya declared, It is dualistic to say Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. The Dharma is itself the nature of the Buddha, the Sangha is itself the nature of the Dharma, and all of them are uncompounded. The uncompounded is infinite space, and the processes of all things are equivalent to infinite space. Adjustment to this is the entrance to non-duality.⁹

In *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, the concepts of emptiness and non-duality are highlighted as aspects of an ‘inconceivable liberation.’ This liberation is so inconceivable that no words could possibly express the realization that one attains from cultivating these dharma doors. Therefore, another technique utilized in the Mahayana sutras is profound visualization exercises. Interactions with a goddess who turns into a man, manifestations of mile high lion thrones, and the transporting of entire universes into Vimalakirti’s living room are all devices used to help jerk the cultivator into a realization of emptiness. Again, no particular method is considered more effective than others, for each cultivator must attain realization in her own unique way that is best suited to her mental inclinations. Thus, the role of the bodhisattva who is greatly skilled in liberative technique is to perceive these mental inclinations and direct the cultivator in a way that will most efficiently propel them to realization.

The Gandavyuha

The *Gandavyuha* or *Entry into the Realm of Reality* is the final book of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* that has circulated popularly as its own corpus. The sutra narrates a pilgrimage of the youth Sudhana, a fledgling bodhisattva from the city of Dhanyakara. After hearing Manjusri (a famous bodhisattva) teach the dharma, Sudhana becomes inspired to seek the perfect enlightenment of the buddhas and sets out on a journey to learn bodhisattva practices from fifty-three spiritual advisors. Each of the fifty-three visits allegorically represents one stage of the bodhisattva's career and upon reaching Samantabhadra, his final mentor, Sudhana has his epiphany and enters the realm of reality.

To understand the doctrinal implications of the realm of reality, I must briefly address the school of thought associated with the *Gandavyuha*. The *Avatamsaka* was the seminal text for a school of Chinese Buddhism that flourished in the Tang dynasty (618-907) called Hua-yen. The school proved to be a strong philosophical movement that focused around the notion of the interpenetration of all phenomena. Thomas Cleary, a scholar of Hua-yen, states:

The Hua-yen doctrine shows the entire cosmos as one single nexus of conditions in which everything simultaneously depends on, and is depended on by, everything else. Seen in this light, then, everything affects and is affected by, more or less immediately or remotely, everything else; just as this is true of every system of relationships, so it is true of the totality of existence.¹⁰

Rooted in the doctrine of emptiness, the Hua-yen school extends the concept to the totality and simultaneity of all existence, a belief that finds a counterpart in the revelation of our protagonist Siddhartha. In the following section I will cite examples of Sudhana's revelation next to Siddhartha's for an interesting look at their strikingly similar focus and tone. Another dimension of the *Gandavyuha* emphasizes the importance of spiritual advisors. Like *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, each teacher offers their own particular form of realization, but in the *Gandavyuha* the teachers are not confined to other bodhisattvas. Sudhana learns from Kings, householders,

children, mathematicians, linguists, night goddesses and even a courtesan. Each has achieved a particular form of enlightening liberation but are quick to admit that their liberation is just one of an infinite number of possible liberations. There are three main ideas emphasized here. Namely, anyone can be your teacher if you are open to what they have to teach, there are endless ways of attaining enlightenment with no true or correct method, and that each being is inextricably connected to the totality of existence.

In sum, what I have presented has been a very cursory examination of Mahayana Buddhist themes. There are literally hundreds of different Mahayana schools and sects that all promulgate slightly different views. However, by individually examining the concepts of emptiness, non-duality, and skillful means as well as within the context of the sutras, I feel that a generalized view of the tradition has been established. The Mahayana perspective having been outlined, I will now illustrate how *Siddhartha* can be interpreted within this Buddhist tradition.

The Mahayana Buddhist Interpretation of *Siddhartha*

When interpreting *Siddhartha* through a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, the novel takes on a distinct clarity. There are many possible interpretations of the characters, symbols, revelations, and structure that I can only begin to illustrate. For the purposes of this paper, I will try to relate interpretations that can be understood within my general overview of Mahayana concepts. The most illuminating connection to Mahayana ideology is played out in the novel's final chapter when Siddhartha meets Govinda and tries to explain his revelatory vision.

Siddhartha explains:

There is one thought I have had, Govinda, which you will again think is a jest or folly: that is, in every truth the opposite is equally true. For example, a truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided. Everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided, only half the truth; it all lacks totality, completeness, unity. When the Illustrious Buddha taught about the

world, he had to divide it into Samsara and Nirvana, into illusion and truth, into suffering and salvation. One cannot do otherwise, there is no other method for those who teach. But the world itself, being in and around us, is never one-sided. Never is a man or a deed wholly Samsara or wholly Nirvana; never is a man wholly a saint or a sinner. This only seems so because we suffer the illusion that time is something real. Time is not real, Govinda. I have realized this repeatedly. And if time is not real, then the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion.¹¹

As I reread this paragraph I find it increasingly unbelievable that Hermann Hesse did not have any access to Mahayana literature. In this passage, Hesse nails the concept of emptiness and non-duality right on the head. This is almost the exact conclusion that Nagarjuna advanced almost 2,000 years ago in his *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Nagarjuna states:

If the present and the future depend on the past,
Then the present and the future would have existed in the past.

If the present and the future did not exist there,
How could the present and the future be dependent upon it?

If they are not dependent upon the past, neither of the two would be established.
Therefore neither the present nor the future would exist.

By the same method, the other two divisions – past and future,
Upper, lower, middle, etc., unity, etc., should be understood.

A nonstatic time is not grasped. Nothing one could grasp as
stationary time exists. If time is not grasped, how is it known?

If time depends on an entity, then without an entity how could time exist?
There is no existent entity. So how can time exist?¹²

If you have never been confronted with Nagarjuna's logic this may be a fun passage to reread several times and ruminate. For this is the same reasoning that he uses to prove that everything is empty of inherent existence. From words to views to the four noble truths to emptiness itself. Time is empty; it does not inherently exist. The present and future are dependent upon the past just as nirvana is dependent upon samsara, suffering upon bliss, and good upon evil. Not only

does Siddhartha-Hesse reach the same conclusions as Nagarjuna, but he uses the same terminology to interpret them. To wit, the nature of the world is illusory. The connection between emptiness and illusoriness is widely prevalent in the Mahayana. Since everything we try to hold as nonempty (such as time, self, words, views, and Buddhist teachings) is empty (i.e. devoid of inherent existence) the nature of the world and everything within it is illusory. The sutras are replete with these connections. In the *Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, Vimalakirti expounds, “Reverend Subhuti, the nature of all things is like illusion, like a magical incarnation. So you should not fear them. Why? All words also have that nature, and thus the wise are not attached to words, nor do they fear them.”¹³ In the *Gandavyuha*, after witnessing incredible displays of the interpenetration of all phenomena through the aid of spiritual friends, Sudhana is usually edified about the illusoriness of these projections. Here, Maitreya exhorts, “Arise. This is the nature of things; characterized by nonfixity, all things are stabilized by the knowledge of enlightening beings, thus they are inherently unreal, and are like illusions, dreams, and reflections.”¹⁴ So, in the passage from *Siddhartha* quoted above, we can detect many strikingly similar connections with Mahayana Buddhism. Beyond the overt connections of emptiness, non-duality, unreality of time, and illusoriness, is the notion of the conventional truth of the historical Buddha’s teachings. Ultimately, anything the Buddha tries to express with words will be dualistic and henceforth only conventionally true. That is why all the Buddhist teachings are considered empty and are merely expedient devices according to Mahayana ideology. As the soliloquy progresses, connections between Mahayana philosophy and Siddhartha’s revelation grow increasingly similar. Siddhartha continues:

Listen, my friend! I am a sinner and you are a sinner, but someday that sinner will be Brahma again, will someday attain Nirvana, will someday become a Buddha. Now this ‘someday’ is illusion; it is only a comparison. The sinner is not on the way to a Buddha-like state; he is not evolving, although our thinking

cannot conceive of things otherwise. No, the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner; his future is already there. The potential hidden Buddha must be recognized in him, in you, in everybody. The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people – eternal life...During deep meditation it is possible to dispel time, to see simultaneously all the past, present, and future, and then everything is good, everything is perfect, everything is Brahman. Therefore it seems to me that everything that exists is good – death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly.¹⁵

In this paragraph, Hesse outlines the exact philosophy of the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the buddha nature. Again, this concept states that all beings possess the buddha nature, hence, all beings are potential buddhas. Buddhahood is not attained, for that would be a dualistic proposition, everyone and everything already is buddha, but we do not realize it due to mental obscurations. This idea is presented also in the “Purification of the Buddha-Fields” in the *Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*. A buddha-field or pure land is a field, universe, or land in which a buddha dwells. In the Mahayana tradition, a bodhisattva makes a vow to devote all his virtues to purifying a field, so when he becomes a buddha, all living beings may be reborn in his universe. Buddha-fields are usually described as filled with jewels and ornaments and everything about them is pure. When Sariputra (a famous disciple) asks the Buddha why his land (earth) is so impure, the Buddha retorts, “...Sariputra, the fact that some living beings do not behold the splendid display of virtues of the buddha-field of the Tathagata (Buddha) is due to their own ignorance. It is not the fault of the Tathagata. Sariputra, the buddha-field of the Tathagata is always thus pure, but you do not see it.”¹⁶ Just as living beings cannot recognize the buddha within due to obscurations of the mind, the same holds for seeing the world around us as a perfect, beautiful, and loving place. Next comes the segment on the stone and the primacy of love.

But now I think: This stone is a stone; it is also an animal, God and Buddha. I do not respect and love it because it was one thing and will become something else, but because it has already long been everything and always is everything. I love it just because it is a stone, because today and now it appears to me a stone...each one is Brahman...I just love the stone and the river and all these things that we see and from which we can learn. I can love a stone, Govinda, and a tree or a piece of bark. These are things and one can love things. But one cannot love words. Therefore teachings are of no use to me...they have nothing but words. Samsara and Nirvana are only words, Govinda. Nirvana is not a thing; there is only the word Nirvana...And here is a doctrine at which you will laugh. It seems to me, Govinda, that love is the most important thing in the world. It may be important to great thinkers to examine the world, to explain and despise it. but I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration, and respect.¹⁷

In this passage the ideas of emptiness, interpenetration of all phenomena, and compassionate love are all intermingled. Emptiness and interpenetration are both displayed in the statement ‘This stone is a stone: it is also an animal, God and Buddha.’ If an animal were not empty then it could never be anything but an animal, but since animals, humans, and stones are empty of an inherent existence they can all interpenetrate into a totality of all existence. ‘Samsara and Nirvana are only words,’ is again the emptiness of views argued by Nagarjuna. And finally, here is the part of the book Hesse scholars argue proves the Christian message of the novel; the emphasis on love. Although I have no qualms with scholars who wish to interpret this as a Christian revelation, is Hesse really talking about a Christian or Divine love in this context? Do any concepts of the preceding revelation make sense within Christian ideology? “Time is unreal,” “never is a man wholly a saint or sinner,” “the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, suffering and bliss, and good and evil is an illusion,” “the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner,” “every sin already carries grace within it,” “a stone is also an animal, a God, and Buddha,” “teachings are of no use to me...they have nothing but words,” are these commonly accepted beliefs and sayings of Christianity? Even though Siddhartha puts

an emphasis on love at the end of his soliloquy, should we disregard all the matter beforehand? How does the message of Christian love relate to his revelation? The idea of love that Siddhartha acknowledges can be understood quite easily when interpreted in relation to the compassionate love of the bodhisattvas. The love that Siddhartha expresses is the compassionate love that arises when one has realized the emptiness of all phenomena. It is the love that emerges when one has realized the interpenetration of all existence, the totality and simultaneity that marks the whole message of Siddhartha's revelation. A revelation that all sentient and non-sentient beings are inextricably connected in the unity of existence. It is the love that realizes a stone is not merely a stone, but also an animal, God and Buddha. The compassionate love that induces the bodhisattva to forgo personal nirvana and choose rebirth into this samsaric existence even when they know that ultimately there is no suffering or any beings to save. The love that wants to help all beings attain this understanding of the interpenetration of all phenomena. The love which compels Siddhartha to kiss Govinda at the end of the novel to give him a glimpse of ultimate enlightenment. Such is the nature of the compassionate love that Siddhartha acknowledges. If all the similarities in this Mahayana interpretation were not eerie enough, then the final scene of Govinda's insight will definitely confound the modern scholar as to Hesse's knowledge of the Mahayana. As the story ends, Govinda asks Siddhartha for one word of wisdom for his departure. Instead of words, he tells Govinda to kiss him on the forehead, after which he experiences a vision of the simultaneity of all existence, of the interpenetration of all phenomena.

He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces – hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, of a carp, with tremendous painfully opened mouth, a dying fish with dimmed eyes. He saw the face of a newly born

child, red and full of wrinkles, ready to cry. He saw the face of a murderer, saw him plunge a knife into the body of a man...He saw the heads of animals – boars, crocodiles, elephants, oxen, birds. He saw Krishna and Agni. He saw all these forms and faces in a thousand relationships to each other, all helping each other, loving hating and destroying each other and become newly born. Each one was mortal, a passionate, painful example of all that is transitory. Yet none of them died, they only changed, were always reborn, continually had a new face: only time stood between one face and another.¹⁸

In the *Gandavyuha*, the pilgrim Sudhana has many similar experiences. Requesting that spiritual friends explain their enlightening liberation to him, Sudhana induces visions of their liberation by touching the teacher. At the end of the sutra, Sudhana enters the Tower of Vairocana and has a shockingly similar experience to that of Govinda's.

The moment he bowed, by the power of Maitreya, Sudhana perceived himself in all of those towers; and in all those towers he saw various diverse inconceivable miraculous scenes. In one tower he saw where Maitreya first aspired to supreme perfect enlightenment, what his family was, what his basic goodness was, how long he lived, what age he lived in, what buddha he met...In one tower he saw Maitreya as a sovereign king directing people to virtuous action; in another he saw Maitreya as a world guardian bestowing well-being and happiness on the world; in another he saw Maitreya as Indra, fostering detachment in those obsessed with pleasure; in another he saw Maitreya as Brahma, describing to people the measureless pleasure of medication...In one tower he saw Maitreya in a group of dragons and serpents; in another, in a group of goblins and fiends; in another a group of titans and demons; in another, in a group of serpents and demons...Just as a monk in the trance of absorption in one of the points of totality is single-minded and undivided whether walking, standing still, sitting, or reclining, and sees and experiences the whole world through entry into the sphere of total absorption in whatever point of totality he is focused on, by the marvel of meditation, in the same way Sudhana saw all those arrays whatever object he immersed himself in.¹⁹

In both passages a realized spiritual advisor helps assist a searching spiritual pilgrim catch a glimpse of the interpenetration of all phenomena. Both students witness the totality of existence while seeing their respective teachers manifest in all creations and through endless lifetimes. Govinda assumes the smile of Siddhartha while Sudhana enters into the realm of reality.

There are many other characteristics of *Siddhartha* that lend well to a Mahayana interpretation. The idea that one should seek spiritual friends, that one can learn from anyone or anything if receptive to its teachings. Like Sudhana in the *Gandavyuha*, Siddhartha seeks the spiritual guidance of the samanas, Buddha, Kamala, and the ferryman. Even though he does not find his ultimate revelation from their teachings, each play a major role in his development that leads to his enlightenment. That the river should be your teacher is a distinctly Mahayana trait. For it is through the dharma door of the river that Siddhartha has a realization of the emptiness of time. And it is through further meditation on the emptiness of time and the interpenetration of the river with the totality of existence that Siddhartha reaches his spiritual maturity. As I have shown above, his compassionate love for all sentient and non-sentient beings emerges from his realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. The idea that language cannot express ultimate reality is just as important in Mahayana as it is with most western mystical traditions. One school of the Mahayana in particular, Chan or Zen, bases its entire practice around overcoming the dualities of language as a dharma door to realizing the emptiness of all phenomena. Again, there is no one path to enlightenment. Siddhartha must find the dharma door in which he is able to best grasp the emptiness of a certain phenomenon, to which he can then further meditate on and extend to all phenomena.

To say that it is futile to look at Buddhism for clues to the organization structure of *Siddhartha*, since (according to Ziolkowski) this novel is essentially Hesse's rejection of Buddhism, is nonsensical. As I have just shown, *Siddhartha* can clearly be interpreted as an affirmation of Buddhist doctrine, not a rejection at all. Yet even if there were no Buddhist interpretation of the novel, how can one dismiss Buddhism in looking for clues to structural organization of a novel entitled *Siddhartha*? Most of the sanskrit translations given for

Siddhartha in Hesse scholarship offer “one who has found the way or goal.” A more literal translation of Siddhartha as an appositional bahuvrihi (a type of compound in Sanskrit that is translated [having ‘x’ as ‘y’]) is “having perfection as goal.” For this is the reason that young Gotama bears the epithet “Siddhartha” and once he has awakened or reached the goal he is no longer referred to as “Siddhartha,” but as “Buddha,” the awakened one. *Siddhartha* is the story of a young Brahmin who has perfection as his goal. The structure of the book very much resembles the life of the historical Buddha. Although Siddhartha’s life does not unfold in the exact historical sequence as the Buddha’s, three clear stages are represented in both accounts. The historical Buddha was first exposed to the life of the senses and realized that he would never be satisfied. Next, he goes off for six years wandering with samanas, learning from accomplished yogi’s, and practice extreme austerities. After learning from all his experiences, Gotama realizes that there must be a middle way. He then goes to meditate on the banks of a river where he finally attains his ultimate enlightenment. Hesse’s Siddhartha first wanders with the samanas and practices extreme austerities. Next, he lives in the world of the senses and mundane concerns. Finally, after learning from all his experiences, Siddhartha lives and meditates on the banks of a river where he finally attains his revelation. Is it really **futile** to look to Buddhism for clues to the structural organization of the novel? From a Mahayana perspective there are numerous other interpretations that can be intimated from the structural organization. In many ways, *Siddhartha* resembles the structure used in various Mahayana sutras. As in the *Gandavyuha*, Siddhartha learns from many spiritual friends (including a courtesan), and his journey is similar to a spiritual pilgrimage in search of enlightenment. Hesse’s attempts to explain the emptiness of the Buddha’s teachings are a common structural trait of the Mahayana. In the Mahayana sutras one must realize the emptiness of the Buddha’s teaching before making

real spiritual progress. One interesting interpretation of the structural organization of *Siddhartha* from a Mahayana perspective would be to see three stages of the book as representing the Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. In the First Turning we have the Buddha's teachings of the four noble truths, which represents Siddhartha's journey up to his first crossing of the river. In the Second Turning we have the concept of emptiness, non-duality, and expedient devices, which correlates with Siddhartha's relationship with Kamala and Kamaswami and his initial revelations back at the river. Finally, in the Third Turning we have the promulgation of buddha nature, that all things already are Buddha, "the stone is a stone, but also an animal, Buddha and God." This correlates with Siddhartha's final stage at the river and his ultimate revelation of the totality of all existence.

In short, whether one looks to conservative or Mahayana Buddhism, there are clearly important clues to be found regarding the structural organization of the novel. To completely reject any Buddhist interpretation of its structural organization is nonsensical.

Conclusions

In this paper I have offered evidence to rebut Ziolkowski's contention that the essence of *Siddhartha* is to reject Buddhism and therefore it is futile to look to Buddhism for clues to its structural organization. In his essay "Landscape of the Soul," Ziolkowski writes, "...any attempt to analyze the novel according to the Buddha's life or his teaching about the Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Path does violence to the natural structure of the book." Does showing an alternative interpretation to the novel really inflict violence? I would argue not. Rather, it makes the book flourish, makes it more compelling, more intriguing, more open to further interpretation. In sum, it makes it the timeless and beautiful novel that appeals to millions of people from many different cultural backgrounds. What does inflict violence upon a book, more

than anything, is claiming that one true interpretation exists to the novel. *Siddhartha* is not about rejection, it is about an underlying unity of existence, especially religious beliefs. To offer that the essence of the novel is to reject a certain religious tradition is to do violence to the meaning of Siddhartha's entire revelation.

Finally, I would like to return to the three reasons proposed for the utility of interpreting *Siddhartha* through a Mahayana perspective. First, I offered that we don't exactly know how much knowledge Hesse had of Mahayana Buddhism. The similarities that I have shown between Hesse and Mahayana philosophy are uncanny. As I started this paper I believed that it was possible that Hesse had zero knowledge of the Mahayana concepts of emptiness, non-duality, interpenetration of all phenomena, and Buddha nature. However, after positing all the connections and examining Siddhartha's final speech to Govinda, I am having a hard time agreeing with my earlier stance. Is it possible that Hesse was familiar with the works of Nagarjuna and the Mahayana sutras? If so, then possibly the interpretations offered in this essay are more applicable and useful in understanding Siddhartha's revelation than expected. If not, it is truly remarkable that Hesse's philosophy paralleled the Mahayana's own development within Buddhism. This emphasizes the second reason for the utility of offering a Mahayana interpretation. Is it not amazing that Hesse used the same points the Mahayana employed to show the emptiness of the Buddha's teachings? Further, that he outlined the concept of emptiness that Nagarjuna expounded 2,000 years ago to demonstrate the unreality of time? Also, Hesse unknowingly explained the Mahayana concepts of buddha nature, compassionate love, interpenetration of all phenomena, and the illusory nature of dualistic thinking. If this is truly the case, then Hesse has revealed himself in a new light as a philosophical genius. For all the concepts of Mahayana Buddhism that took centuries to evolve he has unpacked by the age of

forty-three. Lastly, looking at *Siddhartha* through a Mahayana lens has hopefully opened a vision to understanding why the novel was so beloved in the East. This is, to be sure, not the only interpretation in which the East may understand *Siddhartha*, but it definitely adds one voice to the eastern appreciation of the novel. It also, might prove helpful in understanding our western approach to interpreting the novel. For scholars who believe the novel is filled with too many contradictions, perhaps it would be beneficial to take a step back from our ethnocentric views and appreciate the possible ways the novel defies contradiction. Eugene Stelzig ponders:

Yet despite its ironic and light touches, the sermon of the concluding chapter cannot rise above the contradictions inherent in its logic, something that makes Hesse's most popular wisdom book a problematic achievement: it aspires to communicate wisdom even as it maintains that 'wisdom is not communicable;' it seeks truth knowing full well that 'a truth can be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided;' it maintains that 'time is not real' when the form of the novel, both as narrative and as print, is a mode of temporality.²⁰

Within the Mahayana interpretation of *Siddhartha*, none of these contradictions are problematic, rather they are indicative of the realization that Siddhartha ultimately experiences. Viewing *Siddhartha* from the East may help us understand the meaning of its revelation and make sense out of its apparently contradictory nature. Stelzig, commenting on the possible eastern influence of the novel, writes:

Nevertheless, in my view the gist of these (when considered in the context of the novel) justifies the conclusion that even though the "Eastern" influence is important, the book as a whole expresses a fundamentally Western outlook. Indeed, I would suggest that one of the wonderful ironies of Siddhartha's enthusiastic reception by the American counterculture and student generation of the 1960s is that in the guise of Eastern religion these young readers were taking in, unbeknownst to them, an essentially Western creed.²¹

I would suggest an even greater irony. If the book as a whole expresses such a western outlook why do western scholars find its wisdom so contradictory and hard to grasp while eastern scholars find its wisdom to be a beautiful expression of the emptiness of all phenomena?

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