

## Discussion Questions for *Siddhartha*

Before I begin the discussion questions, I thought it might be a good idea to list the eightfold path to enlightenment propounded by Buddha:

1. Right understanding
2. Right purpose
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right vocation
6. Right effort
7. Right alertness
8. Right concentration

Now, on to the discussion questions.

1. Is the book an attempt to explain Buddhism to Westerners? Is the book an attempt to mix Western and Eastern thoughts about enlightenment and the ultimate meaning of life? Is the book something else? If so, what?
2. According to Buddha, life was pain and his teachings outlined ways to escape from pain. Does Siddhartha attempt to escape from pain in this novel?
3. Although the book mentions the eightfold path in chapter entitled “Gotama,” as follows: “The Illustrious One spoke in a soft but firm voice, taught the four main points, talked the Eightfold path,” but never mentions the Eightfold path again. Why do you think Hesse does not mention the Eightfold path later in the novel?
4. Siddhartha repeatedly mentions that teaching will not help him achieve his final goal. Why does he believe this? What is his ultimate goal? Do you think, like Siddhartha, that teaching will not lead to enlightenment?
5. In his early years, Siddhartha attempts to be a Brahmin, which is defined in *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* as “A member of the highest, namely the priestly, caste.” He later leaves this caste to find enlightenment as a Samana, or ascetic. Does he achieve enlightenment in either of these occupations?
6. After he rejects becoming a follower of the Buddha, Siddhartha begins life as a merchant and then the lover of the courtesan Kamala. Does he achieve enlightenment in either of these two occupations?
7. Siddhartha says that is instructed in the art of love from Kamala. Why does he accept teaching from her, but rejects it from others?
8. Later, after he leaves his dissolute life, he becomes the apprentice of the ferryman and learns from the ferryman and the river. He learns from the river that time does not reflect reality, and that all things are in harmony, flowing, like the river, endlessly. This statement is similar to that of Heraclitus, who noted that “you cannot step into the same river twice,” according to Plato in the *Cratylus*. How does this notion of time and the

endlessly flowing river accord with the Western tradition? Are the thoughts similar or are they somehow different?

9. Siddhartha tells Govinda towards the end of the novel that: “Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.” What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Do you think that either Siddhartha or Govinda have found wisdom?
10. By the end of the novel, do you believe that Siddhartha has achieved enlightenment? Why or why not? Does it make a difference to your reading of the novel if Siddhartha achieves enlightenment?
11. Is the novel a form of bildungsroman where the hero undergoes a series of adventures and ultimately arrives at a knowledge of himself?