

On the Reception of Buddhism in Hesse, Thomas Mann, and Gjellerup

1.

The Nobel Prize recipients Karl Gjellerup (1917), Thomas Mann (1929), and Hermann Hesse (1946) can be counted among those early modernist European writers who—with varying intensity—dealt with Indian-Buddhist thought and were influenced by it.

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and Karl Gjellerup's *Der Pilger Kamanita – Ein Legendenroman* (*The Pilgrim Kamanita: A Legendary Romance*, 1906) are internationally renowned for their Indian-Buddhist themes. In both novels, the protagonists are searching for "Truth." Their respective conceptions of "Truth," however, are very different. *Siddhartha* manages to process many elements of Buddhism, yet Buddhism is merely a guise here, similar to the way Goethe's *Faust* comes in the guise of Christianity. Gjellerup's *Kamanita* does not undertake his search for "Truth"—his journey towards himself—on the same path as *Siddhartha*. Rather, he finds his Truth only (through his love to the beloved Vasitthi) in the illustrious Buddha, whom he met shortly before his death, without recognizing him.

Thomas Mann's literary works are all firmly rooted in European culture. They cannot be called Buddhist literature, not even indirectly Buddhist or Buddhist to a certain extent, because in contrast to the works by Gjellerup and Hesse, there are no explicit Buddhist elements at all. Surprisingly, however, in numerous of Mann's early stories and novellas one can find Buddhist ideas in the thoughts and actions of the characters, for instance the Buddhist concept of the critical moment ("Augenblick" in German) in *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*), *Enttäuschung* (*Disillusionment*), *Schwere Stunde* (*A Weary Hour*), *Der Tod* (*Death*) or *Das Wunderkind* (*The Infant Prodigy*).

This article, as preparatory work for a larger research project, examines the reception of Buddhism by Hesse, Gjellerup, and Thomas Mann, using *Siddhartha*, *Der Pilger Kamanita* and some of Mann's earlier stories and novellas as examples. Above all, the following questions are of relevance: In what way is the reception of Buddhism different in Hesse, Gjellerup, and Mann? How can the search for "Truth" and for oneself be understood from a Buddhist and from a European cultural perspective?

2.

The approaches to Buddhist thought and the reception of Buddhism by the three aforementioned writers are obviously different. For all their differences, both Karl Gjellerup and Hermann Hesse shared growing up in the religious world of the West. Gjellerup was born in Roholte (Denmark) in 1857 as the son of pastor Carl Adolph Gjellerup and his wife Anna Fibiger. He studied theology in Copenhagen, graduating *summa cum laude* in 1878. Gjellerup was supposed to become a pastor, like his father. However, young Karl Adolf Gjellerup, having started to write already in secondary school and quickly become known for his artistic talent, turned to literature and began his career as an author in 1878. After marrying Dresden-born Eugenia Anna Caroline Heusinger in 1887, Gjellerup moved to Dresden for good in 1892. The multilingual Danish writer, who was fluent not only in German, English, and French, but also in Greek, subsequently turned to writing in German: Beginning with *Pastor Mors* (1894), he published more and more of his new works in this language. His models were Goethe, Schiller and Heine, but also Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.¹

Gjellerup wrote *Der Pilger Kamanita – Ein Legendenroman* after carefully studying Buddhist and pre-Buddhist teachings. He immersed himself in, among others, the translations by Dr. Karl Eugen Neumann, *Die Reden Buddhas (Majjhimanikayo)* and *Buddhistische Anthologie*; the account of Buddha's previous lives, *Jataka*;² Professor Hermann Oldenberg's translation *Buddha*; and other Indian-Brahmin teachings and legends such as Professor Paul Deussen's *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda* and *Die Sutras des Vedanta*, and Dandin's picaresque novel *Daçakumaracaritam* (including the introduction by J. J. Meyer).³

The reason why Gjellerup turned his back on Christianity and found his spiritual and literary home in Buddhism⁴ is not clearly evident from his biography. His father died when he was three years old. As a half-orphan, he lived in Copenhagen with his mother and her cousin, a writer and pastor. In secondary

¹ Cf. Karl Gjellerup, in: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/gjelleru.htm>, also : http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Gjellerup

² The Jataka stories deal with Buddha's previous lives. There are 547 Jataka stories in the *Tripitaka*, the Buddhist Holy Scripture. The Jataka stories are narratives that serve to explain Buddhist principles. In Thailand, there are two groups of Jataka stories: Those in the first group can be traced back to Tripitaka, the others were written 300-400 years ago in Chiang Mai – the capital of the Lanna kingdom in northern Thailand – in Pali. Cf. Pornsan Watananguhn/Jörg Tiedemann (1989), *Einführung in die thailändische Kunst und Architektur-Lektüre für Reiseführer*, The Continuing Education Centre and the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 70-78.

³ Karl Gjellerup, in: Note, *Der Pilger Kamanita – Ein Legendenroman*, Nobelpreisträger bei Anaconda, 2005, pp. 316-317.

⁴ As exemplified by *Die Hügelmühle* 1896, *Der Pilger Kamanita* 1906 and *Die Weltwanderer* 1910.

school and university, Karl Gjellerup was regarded as highly gifted. Until the 1890s, the literary works in his native Danish reflect his engagement with Western and Eastern philosophy, as well as his personal experiences. Apparently, his serious interest in Brahmanism and Buddhism corresponded with a general intellectual trend at the time, as can be inferred from a note to *Der Pilger Kamanita*:

“Only in the last decades – the last years – have we learned who the Buddha was, and what he taught. ... The poetry of Buddhism – its innermost –, however, is still a series of complete mysteries to us. One after the other has to be solved if we want to learn to understand its heart. ... As the scholars have done their part, it is now time for the poet to do his: the Pali scriptures are waiting for him. Only then will the Buddha’s teachings come to life among us here as well, will blossom in a German way among Germans. Thus, I hope that my learned and esteemed friend – and maybe others with him – will hail, in this work, the beginning of the fulfillment of that wish.”⁵

In contrast to Gjellerup’s, Hermann Hesse’s renunciation of Christianity was a conscious and firm decision. Although he was very familiar with the Christian world through the work of his grandparents and his father, who had lived in India as an emissary of the Basel Mission, young Hesse from an early age on harbored suspicions against – and sometimes felt deep disgust towards – the same Christianity that his parents saw as great and noble. He was unable to accept the zeal of the Western missionaries, acting on behalf of and representing the “colonial masters,” and the principles of pietistic education seemed unbearable to him.

“Sayings and lyrics were uttered and sung which insult the poet in me.”⁶

Thus, the young Hesse, who had known since age twelve that he was going to be a writer, did not give in to his parents’ wish to continue the family tradition and become a missionizing church official. The fourteen-year-old escaped after a few months in the Maulbronn divinity school. The flight, which his grandfather called a “Geniereise” (a little voyage of genius), ended in a stay in various institutions (Bad Boll, Stetten im Remstal, Basel). After several psychological crises, including a suicide attempt, he started to search for alternative cultures and outlooks. From 1907 on, Hesse dealt with India and Indian culture. Inspired by Schopenhauer, he studied the Brahmin texts *Bhagavadgita* and *Upanishads*. He also experimented

⁵ Karl Gjellerup, in: Note, *Der Pilger Kamanita* (n. 1), p. 319 [translation: IP].

⁶ Hermann Hesse *Mein Glaube* (essay), 1930, quoted in: Volker Michels (2002), “Der ganze Osten atmet Religion” – Siddhartha und Hermann Hesses Beziehung zu Indien und China, in: Regina Bucher, Andreas Furger and Felix Graf (eds.), *Höllendreise durch mich selbst” Hermann Hesses Siddhartha, Steppenwolf*. Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, S. 189 [translation: IP].

with yoga, asceticism, and self-castigation. The intensive engagement with the East led him to India and into the jungles of continental Southeast Asia and Sumatra in 1911.

In December 1911, Hesse returned to Europe. He had not found in India what he had been looking for. Hesse thought the ideas of the world as illusion—“*Maya*,” as Buddha had taught—and of delivering oneself from this *Maya* and the sufferings of reincarnation as the ultimate goal of any human being were too resignative. Now, the bipolar thought of Lao-tse and Confucius seemed to him to provide a welcome way to balance his conflicts of spirituality and sensual living, of conformity and self-actualization.

Like *Unterm Rad* (*Beneath the Wheel*, 1906), *Demian* (1919), and later *Narziss und Goldmund* (*Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1930), *Siddhartha* (1922) prompted a repeated debate of Hesse with himself; it was a projection of his inner conflicts and a new attempt to reach harmony and peace with the world. His search for himself leads him, via “Truth,” to Eastern Philosophy.

Together with his fictitious character Siddhartha, Hesse is searching for “truth,” for “self-liberation” and “self-actualization.” This search is based on seemingly similar but actually different concepts, and takes place on different paths. Siddhartha the fictitious figure is looking for the truth of life, for the moment or instant of contentment, for one-ness: the completion and perfection that is carried out through the single word “*Om*.”⁷

Apparently it is Hesse’s conscious decision to give his protagonist the name “Siddhartha,” the same name that Buddha had as a young prince in his hometown of Kabilbat. From birth, the actual Prince Siddhartha had lived a worldly life and was “awake” (in Hesse’s meaning of the term) already before entering monkhood. Prince Siddhartha tasted power and wealth, experienced luxury, the beauty of life at the court, and lust. But more importantly, Prince Siddhartha also witnessed and realized the suffering of birth, illness, and death. Therefore he finally wants to leave this “*sansara*,” the “cycle of reincarnation” Thus, he escapes from the court and becomes a “*Samana*.”⁸

⁷ The word “Om” originates from Sanskrit and consists of a combination of three sounds: [a, u, m]. Hinduism understands “Om” as referring to the three highest gods: Those are [a] → Shiva, the destroyer; [u] → Vishnu, the maintainer and preserver; and [m] → Brahma, the creator. Buddhism has adopted the word “Ohm” in order to represent the three Buddhist sanctities or “*Ratana Trai*”: [a] “*A-ra-hang*” (Pali) → Lord Buddha; [u] “*u-ta-ma-dham*”, the highest law Dhamma; and [m] “*maha sangka*” → Buddha’s disciples or Buddhist monks. The word “Om” is considered sacred and is often the opening word of a prayer.

⁸ “*Samana*” (Sanskrit) means the not-greedy. Samanas are those who are free from desire.

Unlike Prince Siddhartha, Hesse's Siddhartha was born as the son of a Brahmin. Consequently, Siddhartha lives as a Brahmin and understands the world in Brahmin terms. He and his friend Govinda, like other faithful Brahmins, practice "the art of contemplation and meditation" (p. 3).⁹ Siddhartha, in the spirit of a Samana, knows "how to recognize Atman within the depth of his being, ... at one with the universe" (p. 3). Like Faust, Siddhartha never feels content, but he decides to set out on a different course than Faust. With Govinda he tastes the path of the Samanas, with a clear goal in mind: "to become empty, ... to let the Self die. No longer to be Self" (p. 12). He sets out on "the way of self-denial through meditation, through the emptying of the mind of all images. ... Although Siddhartha fled from the Self a thousand times, dwelt in nothing, dwelt in animal and stone, the return was inevitable when he would again find himself ... and was again Self and Siddhartha, again felt the torment of the onerous life cycle" (p. 13). Basically Siddhartha has already understood the *sansara*, the cycle of reincarnation, but he is not able to let go of his attachments. Due to a misunderstanding by Hesse, the goal or the self-liberation of Siddhartha is—judged from the perspective of Theravada Buddhism—flawed and contradictory in two ways. The path chosen to reach the goal (the means to his end) is not right: On the one hand, Siddhartha is supposed to be liberated, through meditation, from his self and from the suffering that the *sansara*, the reincarnation cycle brings. On the other hand, this liberation from *sansara* through meditation via the "Om" does actually not mean being one with "Atman, with the universe," because the clinging to Atman signals an inability to let go of one's self. With this misinterpretation, Siddhartha could not be freed from *sansara* by escaping his self or his soul in the act of meditating about nothingness and other things. The method of meditation practiced by the Samanas does **not lead to conscious awareness** and to reaching the state of deliverance into Nirvana **through summoning the things at the very moment**.

From a Buddhist perspective, even after many years as a student with the Samanas, Siddhartha's understanding consists of learning (*Pariyat*) and the kind of knowledge that uses the brain, as well as of emotional and intellectual understanding based on practical experience (*Batibhat*) via meditation. However, the method of practical experience through yoga, asceticism and self-castigation, plus meditation, with the Samanas is not the right way to self-liberation or to Nirvana. Furthermore, it is his strong attachment to himself, to his being-the-one-

⁹ All *Siddhartha* quotes are taken from Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (London: Picador, 1973), unless otherwise noted.

I-am or *Atta*—rooted in his vanity and his self-consciousness—that prevents him from a deliverance from *sansara* in the Buddhist sense. And even though it begins to dawn on Siddhartha that he and Govinda might never reach “Nirvana” via the way of the Samanas, because “one cannot learn anything”¹⁰ and the mere desire to know already prevents Nirvana, he still does not manage to reach the state of deliverance into Nirvana.

As far as the teachings of the *Gotama*, the *Buddha*, are concerned, Siddhartha again acquired them as rational and intellectual knowledge. They seemed flawed to him, because the doctrine “of rising above the world, of salvation” represents “something strange, something new, something that was not there before” and, in his opinion, could not be proved (p. 27). For Siddhartha, they were nothing more than a breakthrough towards the “whole eternal and unified Law of the World.”¹¹ In fact, this eternal and unified Law of the World is nothing but “Atman,” “Atta,” or “the self” and corresponds to the “eternal soul” in the Hindu or Brahmin sense. Yet, this unified Law of the World “Atman” does not, from a Buddhist point of view, equal Nirvana in any way, nor the deliverance from suffering and *sansara*, the reincarnation cycle. Thus Siddhartha, and with him the author Hesse, has interpreted Buddha’s teachings mostly based on his reception of the earlier Brahmanism.

Siddhartha may have arrived at an explanation for Buddha, but did not understand the real meaning of this explanation: The “teaching is ... not my [=Buddha’s] opinion, and its goal is not to explain the world for those who are thirsty for knowledge. Its goal is quite different; its goal is salvation from suffering. That is what Gotama teaches, nothing else” (p. 27). What became clear to Siddhartha and made sense to him is that Buddha reached Nirvana through his own search, on his own path, through awareness and enlightenment. It is specifically this *own path* that Siddhartha realizes, and that he finally wants to set out on as well.

This principle appears again and again throughout Hesse’s literary work. Hesse does not have Gotama give further clarifying comments on the topic. It may be that the German author is not convinced by the doctrine of suffering and the cessation of suffering as he thinks it cannot be proven. In the end, what convinces

¹⁰ In German: Lange Zeit habe ich gebraucht and bin noch nicht damit zu Ende, um dies zu lernen, O Govinda: *daß man nichts lernen kann!* In: Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, Eine indische Dichtung. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978, p.20.

¹¹ In German: [...]: das ist deine Lehre von der Überwindung der Welt, von der Erlösung. (Footnote 10), p. 31.

Siddhartha is nothing but the return to the self, to thinking, to the mind, because he does not know the real nature of the mind. The mind, however, is not content with one kind of knowledge only, it does not stay still but thinks so many thoughts, **one after the other**, that a person cannot count or be consciously aware of them. This is the decisive factor that makes Siddhartha follow the desires of his own mind, and so he gets increasingly lost in his suffering, deeply entrapped in *sansara*. He experiences lust in his love for Kamala, tastes power and wealth through trade and his dealings with the merchant Kamaswami, until he realizes the absurdity of this sort of life-game.

Appalled to the point of disgust by his own lifestyle, the son of a Brahmin wants to take his own life at the river, but gets called by a voice sounding the opening and finishing word of all Brahmin prayers, the sacred "Om," similar to Faust's being saved by the Easter church bells. Siddhartha begins to recollect his past life, and hears the tender call from the spirit of *Samana*. He returns to the ferryman, and learns from him the art of patience and contentment with one's own self. Even more importantly, following the simple man's advice, he learns from the *river* itself. In the river, Siddhartha experiences the reflection of his past life, realizes his foolishness and the absurdity of life. He has learned from the river that there is no time, that the river is the same everywhere, at the spring and the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapid, in the ocean, in the mountains, everywhere at the same time, and that for it, only the present exists, not the shadow that is the past, nor the shadow that is the future. In other words: From a Buddhist point of view, Siddhartha has experienced and understood the law of nature, the law of life in the river.

If Hesse had realized at this point that **instantaneous awareness, awareness in a very moment, without thoughts about the past and the future through meditation**, can—like here in the face of the river—lead to deliverance from suffering and to Nirvana, Siddhartha's awareness could be interpreted as awareness in the Buddhist sense. Siddhartha, however, returns to the voice, to the sacred "Om" that was whispering into his ear. "Within Siddhartha there slowly grew and ripened the knowledge of what wisdom really was and the goal of his long seeking" (p. 103), and he feels "all the voices, all the goals" (p. 107): "And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events..." and "when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice ..., but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection" (p. 107). And Siddhartha passes this lesson on to his friend Govinda in a curious manner.

The novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse contains numerous Buddhist elements, from the title to the search for “truth” and details that resemble the life of Buddha: Like Buddha in his tenth life before Nirvana as “Vessandon,” Siddhartha cannot yet get to oneness and perfection, due to an inability to cut the ties to his family/his son. After his worldly “education,” the act of meditation, culminating in the word “Om,” may lead Siddhartha to the “Truth” or to self-actualization, but it does not lead to Nirvana in the Buddhist sense. In *Siddhartha*, “Truth” is understood as *oneness*, as the completion and perfection of the unity with Atman in the sense of the ancient Indian philosophy of Brahmanism. For the author of the novel, India’s wisdom and Buddhism rely too much on asceticism or a rejection of life. Apparently, Hesse was not aware of the idea of the “middle way” in Buddhist doctrine, or maybe he did not understand it. Prince Siddhartha practiced the self-torture of the Samanas just like Hesse’s Siddhartha, but soon realized that this extreme method was not getting him anywhere. Therefore Prince Siddhartha went on the middle way, and became enlightened. As usual, Hesse is primarily concerned with the conflict between himself and life, and with the elimination of this problem. In spite of his active engagement with the East, Hesse remains an occidental individualist. The flight of his hero mirrors Hesse’s flight from himself. And to adapt to life, he – like his hero Siddhartha – must, as a European individualist, find his own way and walk on his own path without having understood the meaning of the path of one’s own in the Buddhist sense: Enlightenment is seen as an individualist event that others cannot share.

3.

Like with Siddhartha, who is conscious of the present moment, the consciousness of many characters appears in Thomas Mann’s early short stories and novellas. This consciousness does not lead to any salvation, although it could; and salvation is not the goal of the protagonists. In *Der Tod (Death)*, the Count is waiting consciously for his death. In his diary, he notes his thoughts before what is intended to be the crucial day of his death, October 12th, his 40th birthday. At age nineteen or twenty, he already knew that he had to die when turning forty. He even imagined making a deal on this with Death, and enjoys, like Faust, the anticipation of the last moments of his life.

“October 8th... I shall have to thank Death when he comes for me, for I cannot wait much longer. Only three more of these short autumn days, and it will be. How eagerly I anticipate the last moment, the last of all! Shan’t it be a moment of bliss and unspeakable sweetness? A moment of the greatest lust?
(Thomas Mann Erzählungen Band 1 (1975), Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, p. 55 [translation: IP])

Death, however, was playing games with him. Not he died on that day, but his beloved only daughter Asuncion. In spite of experiencing the natural law of the *Three Truths (Trai Lak)*,¹² the protagonist is not able to understand that the life of an individual cannot be guided or steered into a predetermined direction, due to his *karma* and his deeds.

The wish or desire for the moment of life and death reappears in another story. In *Enttäuschung (Disillusionment)*, the nameless protagonist yearns for the moment of his life. He expects to experience “from life either ravishing loveliness or else consummate horror” (p. 9),¹³ but was very disappointed at the moment of a catastrophic event in his childhood – when his house went up in flames – because he could not feel satisfaction.

“Fire, fire!” I know exactly what I said and what feeling underlay the words, though at the time it could scarcely have come to the surface of my consciousness. “So this,” I thought, “is a fire. This is what it is like to have the house on fire. Is this all there is to it?” (p. 9)

In another novella, *Der Tod in Venedig (Death in Venice)*, Gustav von Aschenbach tries to question almost every feeling he has, almost every moment of his physical and inner perception, in terms of what they could actually be, what they actually are.

“...he felt the most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward barriers, a kind of vaulting unrest, a youthfully ardent thirst for distant scenes – a feeling so lively and so new, or at least so long ago outgrown and forgot, that he stood there rooted to the spot, his eyes on the ground and his hands clasped behind him, exploring these sentiments of his, their bearing and scope.”

(Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter, London: Penguin, 1971)

Thus, Gustav von Aschenbach is consciously aware of his tragic fate in Venice. He welcomes his feelings for the beautiful Tadzio. He has certainly sensed already that he is going to die. In *Schwere Stunde (A Weary Hour)*, the great poet Schiller’s thoughts in his weary hour of literary creation are described extensively: his ideas

¹² *The Three Truths* or *Trai Lak*: the impermanence, instability and inconstancy of things, the condition of arising, deteriorating and disintegrating (*Aniccatā*); suffering (*Dukka*); and nothingness or the non-self (*Anattā*).

¹³ All “Disillusionment” quotes are from Thomas Mann, “Disillusionment,” *Little Herr Friedemann and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 7-12.

for the content of the play, the choice of words, above all “[p]ain...how his breast swelled at the word” (Thomas Mann, “A Weary Hour,” *Little Herr Friedemann and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 154).

Of course one cannot expect Thomas Mann, who is very much oriented towards Europe, to deal as intensely with Buddhism in his literary works as Hermann Hesse, who had direct experiences with Eastern philosophy, Buddhism, and Brahmanism through his father, his trip to India, and finally his studies. Thomas Mann’s concern with Buddhism is inspired by Schopenhauer, which calls for another extensive study. At this point it can at least be noted that the consciousness of the characters in Thomas Mann’s literary works reflects the consciousness of the author, and thus his intense grappling with himself. Conscious awareness of all things has, on the one hand, to be understood as an important condition for living a worldly life as a moral person, on the other hand it is the essential prerequisite for deliverance in the Buddhist sense.

4.

Unlike Thomas Mann’s early stories and novellas and Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, Gjellerup’s *Der Pilger Kamanita* (*The Pilgrim Kamanita*) is written with the poetry of Buddhism in mind, and is therefore a very convincing Buddhist literary work. With the exception of the meeting of the Buddha with the pilgrim Kamanita in the hall of the potter, which is derived from *Majjhimanikayo* no. 140 (where, however, the pilgrim Bukkusatibutra understands and recognizes the Buddha), and the conversion of Angulimala, again from *Majjhimanikayo* no. 50, 86, and 130, the events narrated in the novel are fictitious – fabrications by Gjellerup. Regarding the geographical location of the city of Kusinara and the use of the scenes in Sukhavati for the one [?] Amithaba from the Mahabharatam, Gjellerup admits,

„ich bin der Ansicht, dass „die Forderungen der Poesie denen der Geographie vorangehen. Dagegen würde ich aber nie erlaubt haben, am ursprünglichen Buddhismus „poetischer“ Zwecke halber auch nur den geringsten Zug zu ändern“; denn daß ich, wie gesagt, die später so höchst populäre Vorstellung von Sukhavati hineingezogen habe, wird man mir nicht als eine solche Entstellung anrechnen, da doch der Sache nach identische Vorstellungen im ältesten Buddhismus lebendig sind. Vielmehr ist es mir ein Herzenbedürfnis gewesen, ein echtes Bild buddhistischer Lebens- und Weltanschauung aufzurollen...“.¹⁴

(“I think that the demands of poetry come before those of geography. However, I would never have allowed myself to change even the slightest detail about

¹⁴ Cf. Karl Gjellerup, in: Note, *Der Pilger Kamanita* (n. 1), p. 316.

authentic and original Buddhism for “poetic” aims; because the fact that I, as I said before, incorporated the image of Sukhvati that later became so popular will not be counted as such a distortion, as images that are essentially identical are alive in the earliest Buddhism. Rather, it has been my heart’s desire to unfold a true picture of Buddhist outlook towards life and the world...” [Translation: IP])

Gjellerup achieved his goal, especially in Thailand, where his “legendary romance” *The Pilgrim Kamanita* is regarded as a Buddhist literary work. The novel was summarized and translated into Thai from John E. Logie’s English translation by two Thai scholars, Sathirakoses and Nakapruteeb. Its reputation and the public praise are definitely based on the beautiful poetic language. It is hard to believe that one is dealing with a translation of a Western literary work. Moreover, the Thai translators very skillfully and artfully blended in and added material from the Jataka and the Sukhavativajusutra of Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁵

The Pilgrim Kamanita is the love story of a couple from distinguished families of merchants, Kamanita and Vasitthi. In the novel, the pilgrim Kamanita relates his adventurous life and his great love for Vasitthi to the Buddha at a night’s lodging, shortly before the Gotama goes into Nirvana in the city of Kusinara. In return, the monk (whom Kamanita does not know) explains the teachings of Buddha, which the pilgrim, however, does not begin to understand until much later, with the help of his beloved Vasitthi, when he has left his worldly life behind after his sudden death.

Kamanita was born in Ujjeni, while Vasitthi came from Kosambi. The story is set in the time of the Buddha, when India was still mostly influenced by Brahmanism. The establishment of the social milieu—and with it, the religious world of the two protagonists—enables the author to create an artistically elaborate legendary romance in accordance with the period in question. Kamanita is the lucky (and very well-educated) son of a wealthy merchant. He possesses most of the skills of a young man of high standing, as if he had been educated at “Takkasila.”¹⁶ In his twentieth year, after his education is completed, Kamanita

¹⁵ What the English and Thai translations have in common is the attempt to highlight the importance of the novel as a text from the “Bhrasutra-Mahayana.” The narrative begins with “Thus I have heard...,” whereas in the German text it says “Einst wanderte der Buddha im Lande Magadha von Ort zu Ort und kam nach Rajagaha...” (“Once upon a time, the Buddha traveled from place to place in the land of Magadha, coming to Rajagaha...”). Besides, the Thai translation begins, in accordance with Buddhist-literary tradition, with paying respect to Buddha and Bothisatra: “Om | nama srisaravabuddhabhotistravepaya ||...” Cf. Suchitra Chongsatitvatana, *The Sojourn of Wisdom and Imagination in Kamanita* by Sathirakoses and Nakapruteeb, in: *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University – Special Issue*, 2008, pp. 1-28.

¹⁶ The “Oxford” of ancient India, located in Punjab.

has to fulfill his father's wish to accompany the royal mission of his country to Kosambi, a city in northern India, far away from his home. The voyage is not just intended to be the first commercial trip of a young merchant; rather, Kamanita is meant to get an opportunity "of seeing foreign countries with trees and gardens, landscapes and architecture other than your own, and other customs; and you will have daily contact with courtiers who are men of the highest station and of most refined aristocratic manners," which his father regards as a "great gain," "for a merchant must be a man of the world" (p. 14).¹⁷

Shortly before reaching the large city of Kosambi, Kamanita experiences the beautiful nature of the north and is utterly enthusiastic about it. In front of him is the place where the two sacred rivers merge, and "the blue waves of the Yamuna roll onward side by side with the yellow waves of the Ganga, and blue and yellow have never mingled. Blue and yellow, warrior and brahmin in the great river-bed of Caste" (p. 16). Here, Kamanita feels as if he was watching scenes from the ancient heroic songs "Maha Bharata," and as if he "heard war-like sounds—the clash of weapons and the blowing of horns, the neighing of horses and the trumpeting of war elephants" where "the sands of Kurukshetra drank their heroic blood" (p. 16).

One afternoon in Kosambi, Kamanita meets Vasitthi, a beautiful virgin of the same standing, at a ball game to honor Lakshmi; and he falls in love with her head over heels. It is love at first sight. On the terrace of the sorrowless under the trees of Asoka, both promise to love each other forever and ever. With firm determination in the face of the short and painful life on earth, they swear, when Kamanita has to leave, to live an eternal life of love together in spheres incalculably far from this world, in paradise. The fate of Kamanita and Vasitthi, however, does not end in a fulfillment of their love. On his way home, Kamanita has a daunting encounter with dangerous robbers. Vasitthi is cruelly deceived into marrying the son of the influential minister of Kosambi, Satagira. Kamanita's unhappy marriage and the unexpected encounter with Angulimala drive him away from home, until he meets the Gotama in the hall of the potter. Kamanita has heard of the Gotama, the Illustrious One, and in fact his pilgrimage is for the sake of the Illustrious One—to accept his teachings—, but he does not recognize the Illustrious One. The two have a conversation, and as a gift in return for Kamanita's story of his past life, Buddha relates his teachings to him. Kamanita, who still clings to the eternal bliss of the afterlife and thus to the love for his

¹⁷ All *Kamanita* quotes are taken from Karl Gjellerup, *The Pilgrim Kamanita: A Legendary Romance*, trans. John Logie (Bangkok: Craftsman Press, 1999).

beloved Vasitthi, does not want to understand the teachings, because he thinks they do not correspond to his expectations and do not come from the mouth of the Illustrious One. Several lives in various forms pass in the afterlife until he, much later, understands the teachings and recognizes the Buddha. With the help of Vasitthi, this realization finally leads him to Nirvana.

What is especially impressive about Karl Gjellerup's Buddhist novel is the atmospheric presentation of Indian life and belief, and particularly Buddha's teachings, which—in contrast to Hesse's Siddhartha—are conveyed extensively and plausibly here. Most formidable is the last scene, in which Kamanita's Nirvana is described with the help of the Brahmin image of the night of the world and the dawn of the world—a successful and convincing blend of Brahmin and Buddhist belief. According to a Thai literary scholar,¹⁸ the novel is a “voyage of education or learning,” or a voyage between imagination and wisdom. The name Kamanita alludes to the term “Kama,” which means “wishes or desires;” while *Vasitthi* refers to “the children of the hermit Vasitth,” and thus suggests wisdom. This legendary romance communicates that Kamanita can be led to Nirvana by Vasitthi through love. The belated enlightenment of Kamanita can be explained primarily by his *Atta*. Although the pilgrim has heard the doctrine of the four noble truths,¹⁹ taught by Buddha himself, he is not yet able to free himself from his self or *Atta*.

Birth is destroyed, the knowledge of freedom is clear, the holy life has been fulfilled, what had to be done has been done, there is no more of this to come—the world has been utterly transcended.

Such ones, my friend, are called „finishers“ because they have finished and made an end to all suffering. (pp. 155-156)

Kamanita, however, expects an eternal, blissful life after death. His goal is to be reunited with his beloved Vasitthi in the afterlife, i.e. in heaven, *Sukkavadi*. And this firm attachment to love and the beloved prevents him from reaching Nirvana. Only once Kamanita, as a tiny star in space, lets go of all attachments, he enters Nirvana.

The Pilgrim Kamanita grew out of Europe's interest in the life and beliefs of the East and Eastern philosophy at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, with

¹⁸ Cf. Suchitra Chongsatitvatana, n. 10, pp. 1-3.

¹⁹ The doctrine on the four noble truths is regarded as the core of the Buddhist teachings: the noble truth about the *nature of suffering*, the noble truth about *suffering's origin*, the noble truth about *suffering's cessation*, and the noble truth about the *way leading to the cessation of suffering*.

Gjellerup using, “to illustrate the milieu, older and more recent works of cultural history—above all the Jataka.”²⁰ *The Pilgrim Kamanita* therefore differs significantly from Hesse’s *Siddhartha*: The life story of Siddhartha contains—even if it comes in the guise of Buddhism and Brahmanism—a lot of the biography of the author, in whose works the human strife and the human search for self-actualization, but also for self-promotion, got repeated, in various ways, again and again.

²⁰ Karl Gjellerup, *Der Pilger Kamanita*, in: Note, n. 1, p. 316 [translation: IP].