

The Ferryman

I will remain by this river, thought Siddhartha. It is the same river which I crossed on my way to the town. A friendly ferryman took me across. I will go to him. My path once led from his hut to a new life which is now old and dead. May my present path, my new life, start from there!

He looked lovingly into the flowing water, into the transparent green, into the crystal lines of its wonderful design. He saw bright pearls rise from the depths, bubbles swimming on the mirror, sky-blue reflected in them. The river looked at him with a thousand eyes — green, white, crystal, sky-blue. How he loved this river, how it enchanted him, how grateful he was to it! In his heart he heard the newly awakened voice speak, and it said to him: ‘Love this river, stay by it, learn from it.’ Yes, he wanted to learn from it, he wanted to listen to it. It seemed to him that whoever understood this river and its secrets would understand much more, many secrets, all secrets.

But today he only saw one of the river’s secrets, one that gripped his soul. He saw that the water continually flowed and flowed and yet it was always there; it was always the same and yet every moment it was new. Who could understand, conceive this? He did not understand it; he was only aware of a dim suspicion, a faint memory, divine voices.

Siddhartha rose; the pangs of hunger were becoming unbearable. He wandered painfully along the river bank, listened to the rippling of the water, listened to the gnawing hunger in his body.

When he reached the ferry the boat was already there and the ferryman, who had once taken the young Samana across, stood in the boat. Siddhartha recognized him again. He had also aged very much.

‘Will you take me across?’ he asked.

The ferryman, astonished to see such a distinguished-looking man alone and on foot, took him into the boat and set off.

‘You have chosen a splendid life,’ said Siddhartha. ‘It must be fine to live near this river and sail on it every day.’

The rower smiled, swaying gently.

‘It is fine, sir, as you say, but is not every life, every work fine?’

‘Maybe, but I envy you yours.’

‘Oh, you would soon lose your taste for it. It is not for people in fine clothes.’

Siddhartha laughed. ‘I have already been judged by my clothes today and regarded with suspicion. Will you accept these clothes from me, which I find a nuisance? For I must tell you that I have no money to pay you for taking me across the river.’

‘The gentleman is joking,’ laughed the ferryman.

‘I am not joking, my friend. You once previously took me across this river without payment, so please do it today also and take my clothes instead.’

‘And will the gentleman continue without clothes?’

‘I should prefer not to go farther. I should prefer it if you would give me some old clothes and keep me here as your assistant, or rather your apprentice, for I must learn how to handle the boat.’

The ferryman looked keenly at the stranger for a long time.

‘I recognize you,’ he said finally. ‘You once slept in my hut. It is a long time ago, maybe more than twenty years ago. I took you across the river and we parted good friends. Were you not a Samana? I cannot remember your name.’

‘My name is Siddhartha and I was a Samana when you last saw me.’

‘You are welcome, Siddhartha. My name is Vasudeva. I hope you will be my guest today and also sleep in my hut, and tell me where you have come from and why you are so tired of your fine clothes.’

They had reached the middle of the river and Vasudeva rowed more strongly because of the current. He rowed calmly, with strong arms, watching the end of the boat.

Siddhartha sat and watched him and remembered how once, in those last Samana days, he had felt affection for this man. He gratefully accepted Vasudeva’s invitation. When they reached the river bank, he helped him to secure the boat. Then Vasudeva led him into the hut, offered him bread and water, which Siddhartha ate with enjoyment, as well as the mango fruit which Vasudeva offered him.

Later, when the sun was beginning to set, they sat on a tree trunk by the river and Siddhartha told him about his origin and his life and how he had seen him today after that hour of despair. The story lasted late into the night.

Vasudeva listened with great attention; he heard all about his origin and childhood, about his studies, his seekings, his pleasures and needs. It was one of the ferryman’s greatest virtues that, like few people, he knew how to listen. Without his saying a word, the speaker felt that Vasudeva took in every word, quietly, expectantly, that he missed nothing. He did not await anything with impatience and gave neither praise nor blame — he only listened. Siddhartha felt how wonderful it was to have such a listener who could be absorbed in his own life, his own strivings, his own sorrows.

However, towards the end of Siddhartha’s story, when he told him about the tree by the river and his deep despair, about the holy Om, and how after his sleep he felt such a love for the river, the ferryman listened with doubled attention, completely absorbed, his eyes closed.

When Siddhartha had finished and there was a long pause, Vasudeva said: ‘It is as I thought; the river has spoken to you. It is

friendly towards you, too; it speaks to you. That is good, very good. Stay with me, Siddhartha, my friend. I once had a wife, her bed was at the side of mine, but she died long ago. I have lived alone for a long time. Come and live with me; there is room and food for both of us.'

'I thank you,' said Siddhartha, 'I thank you and accept. I also thank you, Vasudeva, for listening so well. There are few people who know how to listen and I have not met anybody who can do so like you. I will also learn from you in this respect.'

'You will learn it,' said Vasudeva, 'but not from me. The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it, too. The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it. You have already learned from the river that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek the depths. The rich and distinguished Siddhartha will become a rower; Siddhartha the learned Brahmin will become a ferryman. You have also learned this from the river. You will learn the other thing, too.'

After a long pause, Siddhartha said: 'What other thing, Vasudeva?'

Vasudeva rose. 'It has grown late,' he said, 'let us go to bed. I cannot tell you what the other thing is, my friend. You will find out, perhaps you already know. I am not a learned man; I do not know how to talk or think. I only know how to listen and be devout; otherwise I have learned nothing. If I could talk and teach, I would perhaps be a teacher, but as it is I am only a ferryman and it is my task to take people across this river. I have taken thousands of people across and to all of them my river has been nothing but a hindrance on their journey. They have travelled for money and business, to weddings and on pilgrimages; the river has been in their way and the ferryman was there to take them quickly across the obstacle. However, amongst the thousands there have been a few, four or five, to whom the river was not an obstacle. They have heard its voice and listened to it, and the river has become holy to them as it has to me. Let us now go to bed, Siddhartha.'

Siddhartha stayed with the ferryman and learned how to look after the boat, and when there was nothing to do at the ferry, he worked in the rice field with Vasudeva, gathered wood, and picked fruit from the banana trees. He learned how to make oars, how to improve the boat and to make baskets. He was pleased with everything that he did and learned and the days and months passed quickly. But he learned more from the river than Vasudeva could teach him. He learned from it continually. Above all, he learned from it how to listen, to listen with a still heart, with a waiting, open soul, without passion, without desire, without judgement, without opinions.

He lived happily with Vasudeva and occasionally they exchanged words, few and long-considered words. Vasudeva was no friend of words. Siddhartha was rarely successful in moving him to speak.

He once asked him, 'Have you also learned that secret from the river; that there is no such thing as time?'

A bright smile spread over Vasudeva's face.

'Yes, Siddhartha,' he said. 'Is this what you mean? That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future?'

'That is it,' said Siddhartha, 'and when I learned that, I reviewed my life and it was also a river, and Siddhartha the boy, Siddhartha the mature man and Siddhartha the old man were only separated by shadows, not through reality. Siddhartha's previous lives were also not in the past, and his death and his return to Brahma are not in the future. Nothing was, nothing will be, everything has reality and presence.'

Siddhartha spoke with delight. This discovery had made him very happy. Was then not all sorrow in time, all self-torment and fear in time? Were not all difficulties and evil in the world conquered as soon as one conquered time, as soon as one dispelled time? He had

spoken with delight, but Vasudeva just smiled radiantly at him and nodded his agreement. He stroked Siddhartha's shoulder and returned to his work.

And once again when the river swelled during the rainy season and roared loudly, Siddhartha said: 'Is it not true, my friend, that the river has very many voices? Has it not the voice of a king, of a warrior, of a bull, of a nightbird, of a pregnant woman and a sighing man, and a thousand other voices?'

'It is so,' nodded Vasudeva, 'the voices of all living creatures are in its voice.'

'And do you know,' continued Siddhartha, 'what word it pronounces when one is successful in hearing all its ten thousand voices at the same time?'

Vasudeva laughed joyously; he bent towards Siddhartha and whispered the holy Om in his ear. And this was just what Siddhartha had heard.

As time went on his smile began to resemble the ferryman's, was almost equally radiant, almost equally full of happiness, equally lighting up through a thousand little wrinkles, equally childish, equally senile. Many travellers, when seeing both ferrymen together, took them for brothers. Often they sat together in the evening on the tree trunk by the river. They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, of perpetual Becoming. And it sometimes happened that while listening to the river, they both thought the same thoughts, perhaps of a conversation of the previous day, or about one of the travellers whose fate and circumstances occupied their minds, or death, or their childhood; and when the river told them something good at the same moment, they looked at each other, both thinking the same thought, both happy at the same answer to the same question.

Something emanated from the ferry and from both ferrymen that many of the travellers felt. It sometimes happened that a traveller,

after looking at the face of one of the ferrymen, began to talk about his life and troubles, confessed sins, asked for comfort and advice. It sometimes happened that someone would ask permission to spend an evening with them in order to listen to the river. It also happened that curious people came along, who had been told that two wise men, magicians or holy men lived at the ferry. The curious ones asked many questions but they received no replies, and they found neither magicians nor wise men. They only found two friendly old men, who appeared to be mute, rather odd and stupid. And the curious ones laughed and said how foolish and credible people were to spread such wild rumours.

The years passed and nobody counted them. Then one day, some monks came along, followers of Gotama, the Buddha, and asked to be taken across the river. The ferrymen learned from them that they were returning to their great teacher as quickly as possible, for the news had spread that the Illustrious One was seriously ill and would soon suffer his last mortal death and attain salvation. Not long afterwards another party of monks arrived and then another, and the monks as well as most of the other travellers talked of nothing but Gotama and his approaching death. And as people come from all sides to a military expedition or to the crowning of a king, so did they gather together like swarms of bees, drawn together by a magnet, to go where the great Buddha was lying on his deathbed, where this great event was taking place and where the saviour of an age was passing into eternity.

Siddhartha thought a great deal at this time about the dying sage whose voice had stirred thousands, whose voice he had also once heard, whose holy countenance he had also once looked at with awe. He thought lovingly of him, remembered his path to salvation and, smiling, remembered the words he had once uttered as a young man to the Illustrious One. It seemed to him that they had been arrogant and precocious words. For a long time he knew that he was not separated from Gotama, although he could not accept his

teachings. No, a true seeker could not accept any teachings, not if he sincerely wished to find something. But he who had found could give his approval to every path, every goal; nothing separated him from all the other thousands who lived in eternity, who breathed the Divine.

One day, when very many people were making a pilgrimage to the dying Buddha, Kamala, once the most beautiful of courtesans, was also on her way. She had long retired from her previous way of life, had presented her garden to Gotama's monks, taking refuge in his teachings, and belonged to the women and benefactresses attached to the pilgrims. On hearing of Gotama's approaching death, she had set off on foot, wearing simple clothes, together with her son. They had reached the river on her way, but the boy soon became tired; he wanted to go home, he wanted to rest, he wanted to eat. He was often sulky and tearful. Kamala frequently had to rest with him. He was used to matching his will against hers. She had to feed him, comfort him, and scold him. He could not understand why his mother had to make this weary, miserable pilgrimage to an unknown place, to a strange man who was holy and was dying. Let him die — what did it matter to the boy?

The pilgrims were not far from Vasudeva's ferry, when little Siddhartha told his mother he wanted to rest. Kamala herself was tired, and while the boy ate a banana, she crouched down on the ground, half-closed her eyes and rested. Suddenly, however, she uttered a cry of pain. The boy, startled, looked at her and saw her face white with horror. From under her clothes a small black snake, which had bitten Kamala, crawled away.

They both ran on quickly in order to reach some people. When they were near the ferry, Kamala collapsed and could not go any farther. The boy cried out for help, meantime kissing and embracing his mother. She also joined in his loud cries, until the sounds reached Vasudeva, who was standing by the ferry. He came quickly, took the woman in his arms and carried her to the boat. The boy

joined him and they soon arrived at the hut, where Siddhartha was standing and was just lighting the fire. He looked up and first saw the boy's face, which strangely reminded him of something. Then he saw Kamala, whom he recognized immediately, although she lay unconscious in the ferryman's arms. Then he knew that it was his own son whose face had so reminded him of something, and his heart beat quickly.

Kamala's wound was washed, but it was already black and her body had swelled. She was given a restorative and her consciousness returned. She was lying on Siddhartha's bed in his hut and Siddhartha, whom she had once loved so much, was bending over her.

She thought she was dreaming and, smiling, she looked into her lover's face. Gradually, she realized her condition, remembered the bite and called anxiously for her son.

'Do not worry,' said Siddhartha, 'he is here.'

Kamala looked into his eyes. She found it difficult to speak with the poison in her system. 'You have grown old, my dear,' she said; 'you have become grey, but you are like the young Samana who once came to me in my garden, without clothes and with dusty feet. You are much more like him than when you left Kamaswami and me. Your eyes are like his, Siddhartha. Ah, I have also grown old, old — did you recognize me?'

Siddhartha smiled. 'I recognized you immediately, Kamala, my dear.'

Kamala indicated her son and said: 'Did you recognize him, too? He is your son.'

Her eyes wandered and closed. The boy began to cry. Siddhartha put him on his knee, let him weep and stroked his hair. Looking at the child's face, he remembered a Brahmin prayer which he had once learned when he himself was a small child. Slowly and in a singing voice he began to recite it; the words came back to him out of the past and his childhood. The child became quiet as he recited,

still sobbed a little and then fell asleep. Siddhartha put him on Vasudeva's bed. Vasudeva stood by the hearth cooking rice. Siddhartha looked at him and Vasudeva smiled at him.

'She is dying,' said Siddhartha softly.

Vasudeva nodded. The firelight from the hearth was reflected in his kind face.

Kamala again regained consciousness. There was pain in her face; Siddhartha read the pain on her mouth, in her pallid face. He read it quietly, attentively, waiting, sharing her pain. Kamala was aware of this; her glance sought his.

Looking at him she said: 'Now I see that your eyes have also changed. They have become quite different. How do I recognize that you are still Siddhartha? You are Siddhartha and yet you are not like him.'

Siddhartha did not speak; silently he looked into her eyes.

'Have you attained it?' she asked. 'Have you found peace?'

He smiled and placed his hand on hers.

'Yes,' she said, 'I see it. I also will find peace.'

'You have found it,' whispered Siddhartha.

Kamala looked at him steadily. It had been her intention to make a pilgrimage to Gotama, to see the face of the Illustrious One, to obtain some of his peace, and instead she had only found him, and it was good, just as good as if she had seen the other. She wanted to tell him that, but her tongue no longer obeyed her will. Silently she looked at him and he saw the life fade from her eyes. When the last pain had filled and passed from her eyes, when the last shudder had passed through her body, his fingers closed her eyelids.

He sat there a long time looking at her dead face. For a long time he looked at her mouth, her old tired mouth and her shrunken lips, and remembered how once, in the spring of his life, he had compared her lips with a freshly cut fig. For a long time he looked intently at the pale face, at the tired wrinkles and saw his own face like that, just as white, also dead, and at the same time he saw his

face and hers, young, with red lips, with ardent eyes and he was overwhelmed with a feeling of the present and contemporary existence. In this hour he felt more acutely the indestructibleness of every life, the eternity of every moment.

When he rose, Vasudeva had prepared some rice for him, but Siddhartha did not eat. In the stable, where the goat was, the two old men straightened some straw and Vasudeva lay down. But Siddhartha went outside and sat in front of the hut all night, listening to the river, sunk in the past, simultaneously affected and encompassed by all the periods of his life. From time to time, however, he rose, walked to the door of the hut and listened to hear if the boy were sleeping.

Early in the morning, before the sun was yet visible, Vasudeva came out of the stable and walked up to his friend.

‘You have not slept,’ he said.

‘No, Vasudeva, I sat here and listened to the river. It has told me a great deal, it has filled me with many great thoughts, with thoughts of unity.’

‘You have suffered, Siddhartha, yet I see that sadness has not entered your heart.’

‘No, my dear friend. Why should I be sad? I who was rich and happy have become still richer and happier. My son has been given to me.’

‘I also welcome your son. But now, Siddhartha, let us go to work, there is much to be done. Kamala died on the same bed where my wife died. We shall also build Kamala’s funeral pyre on the same hill where I once built my wife’s funeral pyre.’

While the boy slept, they built a funeral pyre.