

Buddhist Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Even though the main teachings of Buddhism are ‘impermanence’, ‘suffering’ and ‘no soul’, there is intensive thinking about a concept of beauty, and also there is a well-developed aesthetic idea about nature and the concept of beauty even in context of each individual art. In early Buddhism, the aesthetic idea was found in the attitude of monks and nuns towards surrounding nature, as we can see from the verses called *Theraḡāthās* and *Therīḡāthās*. In Buddhism nature and beauty of nature were accepted as aids to spiritual effort rather than hindrances to it. The Buddha may have taught the doctrine of suffering; but His teachings have inspired a great art of the world. According to Buddhism, the mind, in itself, is clear and luminous, but it is defiled by the external factors. Similarly, beauty by itself is pure; it is only the attachment to some of its aspect, especially the sensual aspect, that make it a hindrance to spiritual growth.

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If the mind is properly attuned to beauty, it can then benefit from its appreciation.

Keywords : Aesthetics, Buddhism

บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าพระพุทธศาสนามีหลักคำสอนเกี่ยวกับความไม่เที่ยง เป็นทุกข์และเป็นอนัตตา แต่ในพระพุทธศาสนาก็มีแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับเรื่องความงามอยู่ด้วย และยังมีแนวคิดทางสุนทรียศาสตร์เกี่ยวกับธรรมชาติและ ความงามของศิลปกรรมแต่ละอย่างอีกด้วย ในยุคต้นของพระพุทธศาสนา แนวคิดทางสุนทรียศาสตร์สามารถเห็นได้จากทัศนคติเกี่ยวกับสิ่งแวดล้อมทางธรรมชาติของพระภิกษุและพระภิกษุณี ดังที่ปรากฏอยู่ในเถรคาถาและเถรีคาถา ในพระพุทธศาสนา ธรรมชาติและ ความงามของธรรมชาติถูกยอมรับในฐานะเป็นเครื่องช่วยเหลือนคลายความทุกข์ทางจิตใจมากกว่าที่จะถือว่าเป็นสิ่งกีดขวางจิตใจ พระพุทธเจ้าทรงตรัสสอนเรื่องความทุกข์ก็จริง แต่ว่าคำสอนของพระองค์ได้เป็นแรงบันดาลใจให้เกิดศิลปกรรมระดับโลก พระพุทธศาสนาถือว่า จิตดั้งเดิมมีธรรมชาติผ่องใส แต่ว่าปัจจัยภายนอกทำให้จิตเศร้าหมอง ความงามก็แจ่มเช่นเดียวกัน โดยตัวมันเองเป็นสิ่งบริสุทธิ์ แต่เป็นเพราะความยึดติดในลักษณะบางอย่างของมันเท่านั้น โดยเฉพาะลักษณะด้านกามคุณที่ทำให้ความงามกลายเป็นอุปสรรคต่อความเจริญงอกงามทางจิตใจ หากเราปรับจิตใจให้เข้ากับ ความงามอย่างถูกต้องเหมาะสม เราก็จะได้รับประโยชน์จากการชื่นชมความงาม

คำสำคัญ: สุนทรียศาสตร์ พระพุทธศาสนา

Introduction

It is well known that the Buddha constantly exhorted his disciples to bear in mind that all existence is characterized by the three signs of ‘impermanence’, ‘being oppressed’ and ‘soullessness’. This attitude towards the world naturally makes Buddhism seem to be austere and anti-hedonistic. On the other hand, it provides the inspiration for the development of one of the great art-traditions of the world. This paradox is more apparent than real, and its resolution may be found in the early Buddhist acceptance of beauty as an aid to spiritual development through an awareness of the intrinsic aesthetic values of certain archetypal images such as a forest and a mountain, a river and an ocean, an elephant and a horse (B.G. Gokhale, 1994: 88). Indeed, art helps to extend the physical horizons of Buddhism, deepen its most subtle and sublime ideas and thoughts, and concretize its most elusive, abstract and subjective visions.

Aesthetics in early Buddhism

In early Buddhism, the aesthetic idea was indicated through the attitude of monks and nuns towards surrounding nature, as reflected in the verses called *Theragāthās* and *Therīgāthās*. The image-world of these collections contains well-defined and archetypal ideas of beauty, especially the beauty of nature. For example, the *Theragāthā* describes the beauty of the wilderness and the desirability of dwelling there for a person in quest of liberation. These verses from Bhūta's poem are typical:

When in the sky the thunder-cloud rumbles, full of torrents of rain all around on the path of birds, and the bhikkhu who has

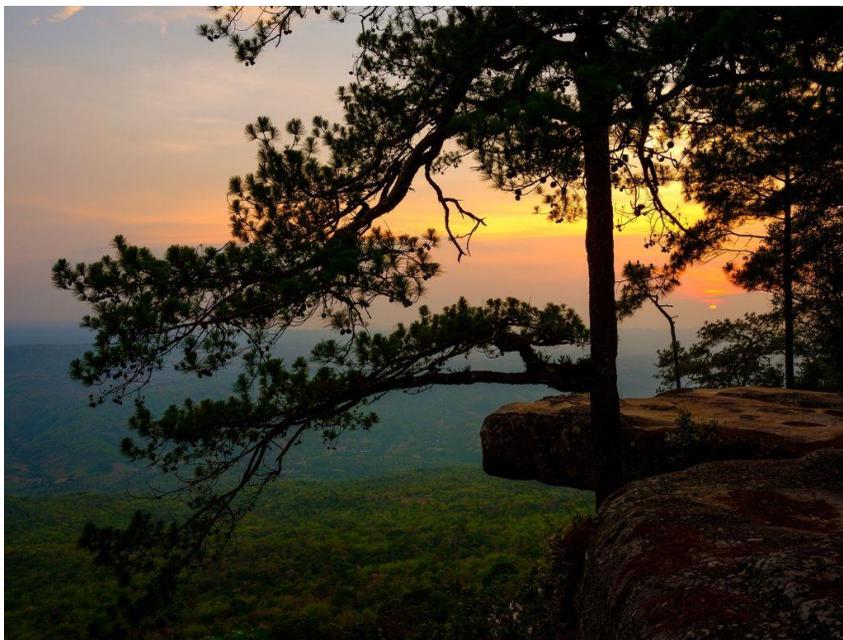
gone into the cave meditates, he does not find greater contentment than this.

When seated on the bank of rivers covered with flowers, with garlands of variegated woodland plants, happy indeed he meditates, he does not find greater contentment than this.

When at night in a lonely grove, while the sky (-deva) rains, the fanged animals roar, and the bhikkhu who has gone into the cave meditates, he does not find greater contentment than this.

When having kept his own thoughts in check, inside a mountain, having taken refuge in a mountain cleft, rid of distress and rid of barrenness of mind he meditates, he does not find greater contentment than this (Theragāthā verses 522-525).

Thus, nature and beauty of nature were accepted as aids to spiritual effort rather than hindrances to it. Buddhist monks and nuns were sensitive observers of the phenomenal world and appreciated the beauty of nature with a degree of intensity. The solitude of the forest was particularly welcome to them. And the forest was a major image in early Buddhist literature. It almost became a mysterious presence with its own identity and personality, solemn, majestic, fearsome and attractive. Retreating in such place monks and nuns uttered verses describing the forest with its floors covered with flowers, resounding with the warbling of birds and thrilled with the dance of the peacock, the roll of thunder or gentle rustling of leaves in the morning wind (Theragāthā verse 541).



Picture 1 Phukradueng Loey Province

Source: <https://bananaincamera.com/2017/08/08/>

The mountain too, like the forest, became a distinct presence. The verses of the monks and nuns are replete with loving references to the beauty and solace of the mountain. The gentle murmuring of a mountain stream over a rocky eminence, the carpet of moss and lichen over craggy surfaces and the procession of colors reflected across a range of hills evoke some of the most beautiful images in *Pāli* literature (*Theragāthā* verses 16). Then, the mountain comes to symbolize a kind of a timeless and brooding presence with its own spirit of introspection and contemplation (B.G. Gokhale, 1994: 87). Another archetypal image is water, which is sometimes used to convey the sense of detachment and absorption in

spiritual effort. The water flowing from a higher to a lower level becomes an object of meditation leading to tranquility of the mind (*Theragāthā* verses 114). A hut by the riverside becomes a symbol of peace and contentment. In the *Nikāyas*, the simile of a well full with clear and cool water is often used, and the use of the image of the ocean in its boundlessness, unity and purity as a symbol of the *dhamma* is well known. Animals such as the elephant and the horse are also contained in the world of images. Both these animals symbolize the concept of the Bodhisattva and his renunciation. The well-tamed elephant or horse is a stock simile in *Pāli* literature and the two animals, therefore, become archetypal in the early Buddhist artistic ideas.

Aesthetics in Buddhist Arts

It is found that art was successfully introduced into Buddhism for the religious purposes. The Buddha may have thought the doctrine of suffering; but with this he never allowed his mind to be dwarfed or obsessed (A. Adikari, 1991: 486). The early Buddhists could not ignore the existence of art all around them. The Buddha himself has referred to it on several occasions. For example, the reference to a dyer or painter painting forms of men and women in red or yellow, blue or brown colors on boards or walls or cloth, indicates that such artistic instances were all around (*Samyutta Nikāya* II: 87). The *Cullavagga* narrates the circumstances under which the Buddha allowed the walls of the *vihāra* to be plastered and coloured with various kinds of pigments, and the whole section is very interesting as it gives us information on the technique of preparing the surface for painting.

In several episodes narrated in the *vinaya*, it is found that the lay person played a great role in institutionalizing early Buddhist art. *Arāmas* (parks) with buildings and their appurtenances were created by lay persons as a gift for the *Sangha*. These buildings were not merely utilitarian, but they had also possessed considerable artistic merit. Some of the richer lay devotees lavished their wealth in constructing imposing and beautiful buildings for the use of the *Sangha* of the Four Quarters (*Cullavagga*: 240). The buildings were either single-storied or multi-storied, sporting columns surmounted with capitals and gateways, ornamented with figures of animals and mythical beings, with their walls well-plastered and with paintings of flowers, garlands and figures of men and women, animals and birds, semi-divine beings and symbols illustrating the major incidents in the life of the Buddha (B.G. Gokhale, 1994: 90). Buddhist art had arrived on the scene with these edifices and it remained for the subsequent centuries to develop the trends already established in the initial phase of the history of Buddhism.



Picture 2 Wat Rong Khun Chiang Rai Province

Source: <https://sites.google.com/site/jutamanee140146/wad-rxng-khun>

A type of edifice which is directly related to the devotional needs of the lay-devotee was the *stūpa*. It is said that a *stūpa* was erected to enshrine the relics of the *cakkavatti* and that this may also be done for the remains of the Buddha's body (*Dīgha Nikāya* II: 110). The *stūpa* was offered garlands and perfumes as a matter of faith, and custom of carving such friezes of garlands and flowers must be directly linked to this suggestion in the *Pāli* Canon (*Dīgha Nikāya* II: 106). We have evidence that there were many *stūpas* built at Asoka's order. These *stūpas* started as memorials, but soon they became shrines and came to be decorated with sculptures depicting incidents from the life of the Buddha and the *jātaka*. The

institution of the *stūpa* as an art-form, thus, owes much to the initiative of the lay-devotees.

The influence of the lay-devotees was also seen in another direction. The descriptions of the person of the Buddha are already found in the *Pāli* scriptures, and many of these contain the earliest elements of Buddhist iconography. The ascription of the signs of great men to the person of the Buddha is found in a text as old as the *Suttanipāṭa*. These ideas were faithfully followed in later iconography. The Buddha is elsewhere described as ‘golden complexioned’, of tranquil gaze, of refulgent countenance, erect and of large frame, all of which characteristics were faithfully translated into iconographic particulars in later Buddhist art (B.G. Gokhale, 1994: 91). It is to be noted that in early Buddhism due to high reverence for the Buddha, the artists did not dare to create his statue or carve him in stone or bronze, therefore, no figure of the Buddha is seen. However, the Buddha was represented by various symbols such as a horse and an umbrella (*chakra*). Sometimes the presence of the Buddha was symbolized by a lotus which has been the highest symbol of Indian art. There were other symbols too. A great white elephant symbolized Bodhisattva’s entrance into mother’s womb. A horse standing on the bank of river symbolized the Great Renunciation. Sometimes Buddha’s presence would be indicated only by the *Bodhi* tree.

In general, Indian art is closely related to life. And most works of art are created to enable human nature, make life better and help people realize the ends of life. The artists endeavor to depict and describe all that can harmonize truth, beauty and goodness. Art draws its sustenance from

life. As a result, the purposes and ideals of life are expressed in art. On the other hand, art governs the principles by which a man lives. This prominent characteristic of Indian art should be kept in mind when we analyze the aesthetics of Buddhist art. Like other Indian arts, Buddhist art is inseparably connected with life, it draws its sap from the Buddhist ideals of life. According to Buddhism, the highest goal of life is *nirvāna* which is a state of desirelessness. Even the desire to attain that state of desirelessness should not be there. All kinds of desire have to be removed so that a state of quietness and calmness is achieved. The artist always keeps this high ideal in mind when he tries to express, by the art, the serenity and tranquility which the Buddha experienced under the *Bodhi* tree after destroying all desires (*tanhā*). Therefore, the artists while creating Buddha statues try to aim at this supernal beauty. They hardly try to depict his physical beauty which is nothing in comparison to his inner spiritual beauty. When we see a statue of the Buddha where he is shown remaining in deep meditation with indrawn eyes, we find that the statue depicts infinite compassion and sympathy which the Buddha had for the suffering human beings. Here there is nothing sensuous, nothing that glorifies the body. Most of Buddha statues always depict such high ideals of Buddhist life.



Picture 3 Buddha Image depicting the Buddha's first sermon
(Sarnath Museum India)

Source: <http://oknation.nationtv.tv/blog/mylifeandwork/2009/01/22/entry-1>

Buddhist Approach to Beauty

The emergence of these archetypes in the imagery of early Buddhism indicated an attitude of acceptance and appreciation of beauty in nature and the animal world in the evolving Buddhist thought. The Buddha's view concerning the nature of the mind and beauty naturally lead to interpretations in which appreciation of beauty became a natural consequence. The Buddha had declared that the mind, in itself, is clear and luminous, but it is defiled by external factors. Similarly, beauty by itself is pure; it is only the attachment to some of its aspect, especially the sensual aspect, that makes it a hindrance to spiritual growth (*Anguttara Nikāya* I: 10). This implies that if the mind is properly attuned to beauty, it can then benefit from its appreciation. In fact, Buddhism made human being conscious of the beauty which he is capable of, and it tried to develop his moral nature by showing the importance of a good life and altruistic work. The ideal hero of Mahāyāna Buddhism (the Bodhisattva) is concerned not solely with his own development, but with that of all beings. One of the Bodhisattva vows is to master all arts and sciences. He vows to learn to use every available medium of communication so that he can help others to grow. With this high resolution at his heart, it is hardly surprising that Buddhism develops one of the richest and most sublime artistic traditions of human civilization (Dharmachari Subhuti, 1983: 94-95).

The initial anti-hedonistic attitude implicit in the *suttas* was transformed not into a hedonistic philosophy but a sense of rapport with the beauty of form, sound and colour. When this happened, there was no more fear of beauty; on the contrary, there began a process of creating a deeper awareness of the sense of the beautiful. This could have led to the

development of the subject of aesthetics, but this did not happen. Because Buddhist monastery could accept a beautiful building with decorative pieces, but it could not be preoccupied with the investigation of the philosophy and psychology of the beautiful as this could have meant a serious deviation from the primary purpose of monastic life. But the rapport with the beautiful in itself was a great gain as it allowed extensive scope to the lay imagination, which became functionally related to the sacred, without scarifying its own sense of the secularly beautiful. This led to the creation of art tradition infused with a higher spiritual value.



Picture 4 Buddha Image subduing the devils

Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/408138784956659193/>

Conclusion

In Buddhism, nature and beauty of nature are accepted as an aid to spiritual development. Buddhist monks and nuns were sensitive observers of the beautiful surrounding; they appreciated the beauty of nature with a degree of intensity. This can be seen from their verses called *Theraḡāthās* and *Therīḡāthās*, which describe a forest, a mountain etc. According to Buddhism, beauty is not for beauty's sake; it has been regarded as an incentive for those who aspire to the holy life. Thus, the primary aesthetic concept at the heart of Buddhist culture is the aspiration of leading a holy life. However, Buddhism has inspired a great and sustained art tradition which plays a great role in extending Buddhism. Buddhist monasteries are the operating centers for spreading Buddha's teachings. And they also present arts such as architecture, sculpture and painting. Generally, love of beauty and nature is manifested in the mural paintings on the walls of the monasteries. Devotion is manifested through creation of beauty. Spiritual merit can be acquired by creating a thing of beauty. Artistic creations are the products of efforts to glorify 'dhamma'. The Buddha once said to Ananda, his disciple, in reply to his statement that one-half of the saintly life is friendship, association and intimacy with the beautiful. "*Ananda, do not say that, for beauty constitutes the whole of the saintly life. A monk, who does not feel affinity and intimacy with beauty, cannot be expected to follow the Noble Eightfold Path and to make use of it*" (Jatava, 2007: 217). Because of this connection between religion and beauty, the stress on the quality of art was extremely high. The artist was expected to create only his best, for nothing but the results of his best efforts would do.

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