

Admiration of Nature's Beauty by Noble Disciples with Special Reference to Thera Gātha

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The aesthetic concepts or the concept of beauty that existed in the society at the time of the Buddha was neither totally rejected nor accepted by the Buddha whereas they were syncretized into Buddhism through Buddhist interpretations with the rejection of negative aspects retaining positive aspects. In other words, beauty in person, music singing, dancing, painting, environment etc. was admired or appreciated in the Buddhist way.

Some people and certain western scholars who have studied Buddhism superficially are of the opinion that Buddhism is a religion of pessimism teaching only the suffering of the world and so there is no aesthetic appreciation in Buddhism. Such people are utterly far from the truth. Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic as it looks at the world objectively.

Buddhist doctrine is based on the Three Universal Characteristics – impermanence, suffering and soul-lessness (*anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*). Therefore, the aesthetic appreciation in Buddhism is also based on the Three Marks of Existence although beauty is of unprecedented admiration in Buddhism. In other words, beauty is to be admired with no intense desire or attachment. The Buddha says the desire begets sorrow.

“taṇhāya jāyati soko taṇhāya jāyati bhayaṃ....”¹

From endearment, affection, attachment, lust, craving spring grief and fear.

Na te kāmā yāni citrāni loke,

Saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo;

Tiṭṭhanti citrāni tatheva loke,

Athettha dhīrā vinayanti chandaṃ.

“They are not sense pleasures, the world’s pretty things:

Man’s sensuality is the intention of lust.

The pretty things remain as they are in the world

But the wise remove the desire for them.”²

According to the Nasanti Sutta of the Devatāsmyutta, the object of beauty is not a problem but it is the problem of the eye of the beholder. It is the attachment to it. Therefore, Buddhism does not avoid objects of beauty nor does it run away from them. Buddhism only refrains from forming the basis for strong likes or strong dislikes but appreciates aesthetics or beauty based on the Three Marks of Existence. Thus, Buddhism recognizes aesthetics or beauty where senses can perceive it simultaneously seeing its own change and destruction-impermanence in beauty.

Encyclopedia of Buddhism- Volume-II introduces that beauty is of two kinds.

1. Physical or external beauty.
2. Moral or spiritual beauty.

The former satisfies the sense organs whereas the latter satisfies the intellectual and moral sense. Buddhism realizes the vanity of the physical beauty and attachment to external beauty leading to temporary pleasure that causes the loss of insight or true knowledge. Let beautiful things be there in the world, but attachment to them is to be avoided.

¹ Dhṃ. Piyaṅga XVI PTS. 212 – 216

² CDB (SN), Devatāsmyutta, Ch.1, 34 (4). WPB. p.110.

The world is full of beauty in a spiritual sense, but it is defiled by man who tries to possess it. Therefore, the Buddha's advice is to avoid attachment to beauty that pleases the physical eye and to cultivate the moral or spiritual beauty that helps man to realize beauty supreme within his own mind. This is the spiritual beauty.

In the Kevaḍḍha (Kevaṭṭa) Sutta,³ aesthetic aspect is used to communicate philosophical aspect. A story of the monk who travelled to the heavenly abodes to find a solution to his question finally returned to the Buddha. In the Mahāsamaya Sutta⁴, names of all Hindu deities, appreciation of their positions are dealt with and in the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta⁵, the pleasant sounds and styles of the stanzas are appreciated.

To convey doctrinal and philosophical matters many similes are adopted in Suttas. Here are some examples. Alagaddūpama⁶, Vammīka⁷, Rataviṇīta⁸, Laṭukikopama⁹, Cūlahatthipadopama¹⁰, kakacūpama¹¹ Kasībharadvāj.¹² This is the Buddhist aspect of aesthetics. All the following examples bear evidences in this regard.

Aesthetic appreciation in Buddhism can be found in several major aspects; namely, environment, places, person, monasteries, arts, poetry, music songs, singing, reciting, dancing, drama etc.

Noble Disciples admired nature's beauty and was inspired by natural beauty without attachment.

Arahant Sappaka Thera who stayed at Lonagiri Vihāra on the banks of Ajakarani described the beauty of the place with a remarkable sense of detachment.

“When the crane, with clear bright wings, terrified by the fear of the black cloud, flees to shelter, then the River Ajakarṇī delights me.

When the crane, clear and bright, terrified by the fear of the black cloud, flee to refuge, not seeing refuge, then the River Ajakarṇī delights me.

³ LDB (DN), 11. WPB. p .179.

⁴ LDB (DN), 20. WPB. pp. 316 – 319.

⁵ LDB (DN), 32. WPB. pp. 472 – 478.

⁶ MLDB (MN), 22. WPB. p. 224.

⁷ MLDB (MN), 23. WPB. p. 237.

⁸ MLDB (MN), 24. WPB. p. 240.

⁹ MLDB (MN), 66. WPB. p. 551.

¹⁰ MLDB (MN), 27. WPB. p. 269.

¹¹ MLDB (MN), 21. WPB. p. 217.

¹² KN, (Sn), 1.4. PTS. vv. 76-82.

Whom indeed do the jambu trees not delight there on both the banks? They adorn the bank of the river behind my cave.

The deep-voiced frogs, well rid of the group of those who rejoice in the undying, croak. “Today is not the time for staying away from the hill-streams. The River Ajakaraṇī is safe, pleasant and delightful.”¹³

*“Yadā balākā sucipaṇḍaracchadā, kāḷassa meghassa bhayena tajjitā;
Palehiti ālayamālayesinī, tadā nadī ajakaraṇī rameti maṃ.”*

*Yadā balākā suvisuddhapaṇḍarā, kāḷassa meghassa bhayena tajjitā;
Pariyesati leṇamaleṇadassinī, tadā nadī ajakaraṇī rameti maṃ.”*

*Kaṃ nu tattha na ramenti, jambuyo ubhato tahiṃ;
Sobhenti āpagākūlaṃ, mama leṇassa pacchato.”*

*Tā matamadasaṅghasuppahīnā,
Bhekā mandavatī panādayanti;
Nājja girinadīhi vippavāsasamayo,
Khemā ajakaraṇī sivā surammā’ ti.”*

Venerable Kāḷudāyi who described the beauty of a season spoke like a poet.

“Crimson now, Sir, are the trees of the forest,
Having shed their foliage, they’re eager to fruit,
(Their flowers are) blazing forth like brilliant flames,
— It is a luscious time of year, Great Hero.

The blossoming trees, so pleasing to the mind,
Spread their fragrance in every direction,
Surrendering their leaves and longing for fruit;
— The time has come to depart from here, Hero.

It is neither too cold, nor again too hot,
The season is pleasant, suited for travel.

¹³ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.307 – 310, p. 35.

My Lord, let the Sakyas and Koliyas see you

— Facing westward and crossing the Rohini.”¹⁴

“Āṅgārino dāni dumā bhadante, phalesino chadanaṃ vippahāya;

Te accimantova pabhāsayanti, samayo mahāvīra bhāgī rasānaṃ.

Dumāni phullāni manoramāni, samantato sabbadisā pavanti;

Pattaṃ pahāya phalamāsasānā, kālo ito pakkamanāya vīra.

Nevātisītaṃ na panātiuṇhaṃ, sukhā utu addhaniyā bhadante;

Passantu taṃ sākiyā koḷiyā ca, pacchāmukhaṃ rohiniyaṃ tarantaṃ.

Āsāya kasate khattaṃ, bījaṃ āsāya vappati;

Āsāya vāñijā yanti, samuddaṃ dhanahārakā;

Yāya āsāya tiṭṭhāmi, sā me āsā samijjhatu.

Punappunaṃ ceva vapanti bījaṃ, punappunaṃ vassati devarājā;

Punappunaṃ khattaṃ kasanti kassakā, punappunaṃ dhaññamupeti ratṭhaṃ.

Punappunaṃ yācanakā caranti, punappunaṃ dānapatī dadanti;

Punappunaṃ dānapatī daditvā, punappunaṃ saggamupenti ṭhānaṃ.

Vīro have sattayugaṃ puneti, yasmim kule jāyati bhūripañño;

Maññāmahaṃ sakkati devadevo, tayā hi jāto muni saccanāmo.

Suddhodano nāma pitā mahesino, buddhassa mātā pana māyanāmā;

Yā bodhisattaṃ parihariya kucchinā, kāyassa bheda tidivamhi modati.

Sā gotamī kālakatā ito cutā, dibbehi kāmehi samaṅgibhūtā;

Sā modati kāmaguṇehi pañcahi, parivāritā devagaṇehi tehi.

Buddhassa puttomhi asayhasāhino, aṅgīrasassappaṭimassa tādino;

Pitupitā mayhaṃ tuvaṃsi sakka, dhammena me gotama ayyakosī”ti.

¹⁴ Access to Insight, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/index.html> (Offline Edition 2010.01.26.22).Thag, 10.1 PTS. vv. 527 – 529.

Sirivaḍḍha Thera

The flashes of lightning fall upon the cleft of Vebhāra and Paṇḍava, but gone to the cleft in the mountain the son of the incomparable venerable one meditate.”¹⁵

“Vivaramanupatanti vijjutā, vebhārassa ca paṇḍavassa ca;
Nagavivaragato ca jhāyati, putto appaṭimassa tādino”’ti.

Rāmaṇeyyaka Thera

“Amidst the sound of chirping and the cries of the birds, this mind of mine does not waver, for devotion to solitude is mine.”¹⁶

“Cihacihābhinadite, sippikābhirutehi ca;
Na me taṃ phandati cittaṃ, ekattanirataṃ hi me”’ti.

Vimala Thera

The earth is sprinkled, the wind blows, lightning flashes in the sky. My thoughts are quietened, my mind is well concentrated.”¹⁷

“Dharaṇī ca siṅcati vāti, māluto vijjutā carati nabhe;
Upasamanti vitakkā, cittaṃ susamāhitaṃ mamā”’ti.

Khitaka Thera utters in happiness;

“Truly my body is light, touched much joy and happiness. My body floats at it were, like cooton blown by the wind.”¹⁸

“Lahuko vata me kāyo, phuṭṭho ca pītisukhena vipulena;
Tūlamiva eritaṃ mālutena, pilavatīva me kāyo”’ti.

Vanavaccha Thera takes delights in nature with flora and fauna inspiration.

“With clear water and wide crags, haunted by monkeys and deer, covered with oozing moss, those rocks delight me”¹⁹

¹⁵ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.1.41 , p. 6.

¹⁶ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.1.49, p. 7.

¹⁷ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.1.50, p. 7.

¹⁸ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.1.104, p. 14.

¹⁹ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.1.113, p. 15.

“Acchodikā puthusilā, gonaṅgulamigāyutā;
Ambusevālasañchannā, te selā ramayanti ma”nti.

Heraññakāni Thera emphasizes.

“Days and nights pass by; life is brought to halt. The life of mortals is exhausted like the water of small streams.

But while doing evil actions the fool does not understand that afterwards it is better for him; truly his fruit is evil.”²⁰

“Accayanti ahorattā, jīvitam uparujjhati;
Āyu khīyati maccānaṃ, kunnadīnaṃva odakaṃ.

Atha pāpāni kammāni, karaṃ bālo na bujjhati;
Pacchāssa kaṭukaṃ hoti, vipāko hissa pāpako”ti.

Regarding the **Cūḷakatheragāthā**, Andrew Olendzki says,

The first stanza reflects the balanced appreciation of the natural world that comes from the focused but equanimous mind in meditation. Pleasurable sensations, such as the ones described here in response to the beauty of nature, can be experienced mindfully by those devoid of craving, without the tendency present in most of us to cling to the pleasure or resist its inevitable passing away. Early Buddhist poetry often points out the beauties of nature, but seldom lingers on them.

The second stanza leads one on to higher aspirations. It inspires the listener (for the was primarily an oral tradition) to give up the mundane pursuits of the worldly life, engage in the purifying and clarifying enterprise of meditation, tread diligently the straight path pointed out by the Buddha and, finally, attain in this very lifetime the perfection of the human condition.”²¹

“The fair-crested peacocks cry out, fair-winged with beautiful blue necks, fair-faced and with beautiful song and fine cry; the great earth is well-grassed and well-watered; the sky has good clouds.

²⁰ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.2.145, p. 19.

²¹ Access to Insight, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.02.46.olen.html> (Offline Edition 2010.01.26.22).

There is the beautiful aspect of a happy man; meditate upon it; a good man finds it easy to go forth in the teaching of the well-enlightened one. Attain that utmost unchanging state, most pure, subtle, very hard to see.”²²

“Nadanti morā susikhā supekhuṇā, sunīlagīvā sumukhā sugajjino;

Susaddalā cāpi mahāmahī ayaṃ, subyāpitambu suvalāhakaṃ nabhaṃ.

“Sukallarūpo sumanassa jhāyataṃ, sunikkamo sādhu subuddhasāsane;

Susukkasukkaṃ nipuṇaṃ sududdasaṃ, phusāhi taṃ uttamamaccutaṃ pada’nti.

Andrew Olendzki comments on the **Bhūtattheragāthā** thus,

“Three entirely different moods are portrayed so sensitively in the first three stanzas of this poem by the monk Bhuta — the first wild and clamorous, the second bright and benevolent, the third dark and mysterious. Constant among these dramatic changes of nature is the meditating monk, content in any setting.

Mindful awareness allows all things to be just what they are, undisturbed by the reconstructions of the petty ego. Like the tiny figure in a Chinese landscape painting, the monk blends into phenomena because of his transparency of self.

The original tristubh meter is an alteration of 12 and 13 syllables per line, reproduced here in a 12 and 11 syllable translation that seems to work better in English. The Pali images are so richly textured in this poem, one could easily use twice as many English words and still not capture the nuances.

The second line alone, for example, evokes the image of twisted streams of water cascading down the steep streambeds of a mountain gorge, and then transfers the image to the heavens, where the plunging rivulets now course down the invisible tracks left everywhere in the sky by the passage of birds. That's a lot to fit into eleven syllables!”²³

“When the thundering storm cloud roars out in the mist,

And torrents of rain fill the paths of the birds,

Nestled in a mountain cave, the monk meditates.

— No greater contentment than this can be found.

²² Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders' Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38, V.2.211 – 212, p. 26.

²³ Access to Insight, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.09.00x.olen.html> (Offline Edition 2010.01.26.22).

When along the rivers the tumbling flowers bloom
 In winding wreaths adorned with verdant color,
 Seated on the bank, glad-minded, he meditates.
 — No greater contentment than this can be found.

When in the depths of night, in a lonely forest,
 The rain-deva drizzles and the fanged beasts cry,
 Nestled in a mountain cave, the monk meditates.
 — No greater contentment than this can be found.

When restraining himself and his discursive thoughts,
 (Dwelling in a hollow in the mountains' midst),
 Devoid of fear and barrenness, he meditates.
 — No greater contentment than this can be found.

When he is happy — expunged of stain, waste and grief,
 Unobstructed, unencumbered, unassailed —
 Having ended all defilements, he meditates.
 — No greater contentment than this can be found.”²⁴

“Yadā nabhe gajjati meghadundubhi, dhārākulā vihagapathe samantato;
 Bhikkhū ca pabbhāragatova jhāyati, tato ratim paramataram na vindati.

Yadā nadīnaṃ kusumākulānaṃ, vicitta-vāneyya-vaṭaṃsakānaṃ;
 Tīre nisinna sumanova jhāyati, tato ratim paramataram na vindati

Yadā nisīthe rahitamhi kānane, deve gaḷantamhi nadanti dāṭṭhino;
 Bhikkhū ca pabbhāragatova jhāyati, tato ratim paramataram na vindati.

Yadā vitakke uparundhiyattano, nagantare nagavivaram samassito;
 Vītaddaro vītakhilova jhāyati, tato ratim paramataram na vindati.

Yadā sukhī malakhilasokanāsano, niraggaḷo nibbanatho visallo;

²⁴ Access to Insight, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.09.00x.olen.html>
 (Offline Edition 2010.01.26.22).Thag 9 PTS: vv. 522 – 526

Sabbāsava byantikato va jhāyati, tato ratim paramataram na vindatī”ti.

Samkiccattheragāthā that discusses inspiration from nature in the process of mind development is as follows;

“What do you want in the woods, my boy,
like a bird exposed to the rain?
Monsoons refresh you,
for seclusion is for those in jhana.

As the monsoon wind
drives the clouds in the rainy season,
so thoughts concerned with seclusion
impel me.

A black crow
making its home in a charnel ground
inspires within me mindfulness in —
based on dispassion for — the body.

One whom others don’t guard,
who doesn’t guard others:
He is a monk who lies down in ease,
unconcerned with sensual passions.

With clear waters & massive boulders,
frequented by monkeys & deer,
covered with moss & water weeds:
those rocky crags refresh me.

I’ve lived in wildernesses,
canyons, & caves,
isolated dwellings frequented by predator & prey,
but never have I known an ignoble, aversive resolve:

“May these beings be destroyed, be slaughtered, fall into pain.”

The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One’s bidding, done;
the heavy load, laid down;
the guide to becoming, uprooted.
And the goal for which I went forth
from home life into homelessness
I’ve reached: the end of all fetters.

I don’t delight in death,
Don’t delight in living.
I await my time like a worker his wage.
I don’t delight in death,
don’t delight in living.
I await my time mindful, alert.”²⁵

Udāyin Thera talks about the Buddha by means of a simile of a lotus.

“As a lotus born in water grows, but is not defiled by the water, being sweet-selling, delightful.

In the same way too the Buddha, born in the world, dwells in the world; he is not defiled by the world as the lotus is not defiled by the water.”²⁶

“Yathāpi udake jātaṃ, puṇḍarīkaṃ pavaddhati;
Nopalippati toyena, sucigandhaṃ manoramaṃ.

Tatheva ca loke jāto, buddho loke viharati;
Nopalippati lokena, toyena padumaṃ yathā.”

²⁵ Access to Insight, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.11.01.thhtml>(Offline Edition 2010.01.26.22).Thag 11.1 PTS. vv. 597 – 607.

²⁶ Norman, K.R. Tr. (1969), The Elders’ Verses I Theragāthā, PTS. Tr Series. No.38,V.15. 700 – 7001, p. 68.

Conclusion

Sāriputta and Moggallāna, in their lay life having watched in a Mountain Festival (giraggasamajja) some dancing performances which roused mean, crude, vulgar and immoral emotions were disgusted of life. The modern society is replete with multifarious sources of entertainments, dramas, teledramas, films, literature, illustrations, songs and aesthetic information which incur unwholesome, stale, noxious impacts in the minds of children, youths and adults causing detrimental mentality and behavior in their family and social life.

Therefore, just as aesthetic concepts that existed in the society at the time of the Buddha were syncretized through Buddhist interpretations with the rejection of negative aspects retaining positive aspects, beauty in person, music singing, dancing, painting, environment and other forms of fine arts etc should be created and appreciated in the Buddhist way based on the Three Universal Characteristics.

Abbreviations

AN : Aṅguttara Nikāya

Dhp : Dhammapada

DN : Dīgha Nikāya

Iti : Itivuttaka

Khp : Khuddakapāṭa

KN : Khuddaka Nikāya

MN : Majjhima Nikāya

SN : Saṃyutta Nikāya

Thag : Theragāthā

CDB : The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Saṃyutta Nikāya)

MLDB : The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)

PTS : Pāli Text Society, London

WPB : Wisdom Publications. Boston

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