

Buddhistic Approach to Beauty

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Abstract

Beauty, which is one of the three ultimate values, besides truth and goodness, has always charmed and challenged the spirit of man. From the immemorial time, human being tried to investigate the nature of beauty. This resulted in the variation of the concept of beauty. Sometimes the concept of beauty is confined to objective qualities, sometimes to subjective faculties and sometimes to the synthesis of both. Thus, it seems that there is no absolute view about the concept of beauty. However, almost all aesthetic theories accept that beauty is not an immediate property of things; it involves a relation to the mind. In other words, it is a pleasant feeling and whatever creates this kind of feeling contains beauty. According to Buddhism, beauty is neither a fixed concept nor a quality which can exist eternally. Beauty can be perceived as a part of phenomena in the interrelated, ever-changing world. That is, from the point of view of *aniccatā*, beauty is the product of human creativity, and from the point of view of *Śūnyatā*, beauty is aesthetic impression.

Keywords: Buddhistic approach, Beauty, Buddhism

Introduction

The concept of beauty plays a great role in human life. We rarely come across human being who is not happy to see a beautiful thing. The idea of beauty always enlivens human life. For a common man, beauty is the power of attracting the human sensibilities, which is possessed by certain objects. The awareness of beauty comes in the form of an enjoyment and delight which we experience when we have a

contact with such things. Everyone knows how to discriminate between what is beautiful and ugly, but it is difficult to say wherein beauty consists, or what there can be common to all of which we call beautiful things. In other words, beauty is invisible; it is only an object having beauty that we can see. We cannot see beauty in itself, just as we cannot see goodness but only a good man and his effects. That is why many philosophers said that beauty cannot be really defined; because it belongs to the

category of the absolute. However, some philosophers have tried to give definitions of beauty. They defined beauty in different ways. Sometimes the concept of beauty had been taken to refer to a quality or attribute which we discover in things, and which is present in them irrespective of whether it is discovered or not. Sometimes it was claimed that beauty is not a quality in objects but only an idea in human mind, that is to say, it is in the eye of the beholder.

Concept of Beauty in Buddhism

As the main tenets of Buddhism are ‘suffering’, ‘impermanence’ and ‘no soul’, some have the misconception that Buddhism has a pessimistic outlook; therefore, it has very little to do with the notion of beauty, and with its doctrine of renunciation of the worldly life, the concept of beauty in Buddhism is vague. Some even say that Buddhism denounces beauty. Although these remarks may at first appear to be very convincing, they are in fact far from the truth and are no more than mistaken generalizations. Through careful examination of Buddhist teachings, it is shown to be otherwise, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Buddhism holds that impermanence is reality in itself. The notion of impermanence may sound nihilistic. Nevertheless, it is not the denial of the world. It merely implies that everything depends on its cause (Dependent Origination), nothing exists permanently; it is in

flux. This is the philosophy of change and continuity. And in it, it is possible to perceive beauty which can ever be human unending source of inspiring joy. In Buddhist worldview, beauty is not an inherent property of a given object, but rather is the product of human artifice [1]. From Buddhist scriptures it is found that Early Buddhists had developed some fundamental concepts concerning the nature and function of beauty in human life. According to them, beauty is the product of human creativity, and it is a symbol of the astounding power of the human mind [2]. It is the object of the senses, and its enjoyment is primarily sensuous. The object of beauty is to give pleasure, and the best way of enjoying beauty is to do so without attachment. The terms found in *pāli* literature, which indicate the sense of beauty, can be reduced to two major categories, namely those which relate to qualities of an object that make it beautiful and those which relate to feelings and emotions aroused by a perception of beauty. Therefore, beauty emerges from the existence of a beautiful form and its perception by a mind which is in a state conducive to its perception and appreciation. It produces a sense of wonder, an emotion of pleasure, joy, agreeableness, enjoyment and tranquility. Beauty and the human mind which perceives it are both pure in their inherent nature in terms of ethical qualities. It is only the influence of a state of consciousness characterized by attachment (*Upādāna*) that leads to spiritual result which is undesirable [3]. If one is able to

control the element of attachment, beauty can assist the spiritual development. It is in this sense that the presence of an object of beauty was accepted by early Buddhists.

According to value subjectivists, the existence of beauty depends on subjective experience. Thus, beauty is human perception. On the other hand, if beauty exists objectively in the external world, as value objectivists claim, there are aesthetic properties in the world. The interpretation of beauty can vary, depending on how we characterize it ontologically. Nevertheless, in both cases, provided that we think of beauty in terms of traditional Western metaphysics, beauty is a fixed concept or quality similar to Platonic universal concepts. If this Western understanding of beauty is correct, then beauty cannot exist in the Buddhist tradition, because nothing exists in the world according to their understanding of reality as emptiness. However, if we study carefully, we will find that Buddhist concept of emptiness provides a different approach to understanding of beauty.

One famous school of emptiness-teaching (*Śūnyatā-vāda*) is the Madhyamika school in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Nāgārjuna (150-250 A.D.), the founder of this school, re-emphasized the Buddha's rejection of all speculative views. According to Nāgārjuna, everything that arises depends on other conditions; therefore, nothing can have an original and inherent nature. That is, there is nothing with its own nature; there is no true substance which exists by itself.

Therefore, reality is recognized as a passing phenomenon, which is in between absolute 'non-existence' and 'substantial existence' [4]. In other words, this interpretation of reality neither denies the external existence of entities in reality nor supports their universal substantial natures. Thus, the teaching of emptiness is not nihilistic; rather, its focus is on the interrelatedness of the world. According to this teaching, nothing can exist eternally or without depending on other conditions.

Thus, the emptiness of the world is not a denial of beauty in nature. *Śūnyatā* merely implies that there being the cause, there is the effect, and there being the absence of the cause, there is the absence of the effect [5]. Therefore, there is no substance or entity continuing to exist through different states. And if nothing exists in the world, that is, even the flower, for example, does not exist; however, there is an impression which we can perceive from the non-substance flower. Beauty is neither a fixed concept nor a quality which can exist eternally. There is no such thing as *beautifulness* in the world. However, within the flux of the world, it is possible to perceive aesthetic impression.

Then, if beauty in the Buddhist tradition is an impression which can be perceived by human being, one may think that the Buddhist view is similar to the value subjectivists' recognition of beauty as human perception. However, Buddhist beauty is not necessarily a subjective experience. Because of the

emptiness of the world, there is no distinction between human being and nature or self and others. There is neither subject nor object. Therefore, beauty should be understood in the light of a transcending of dualistic world view. When we see a flower and perceive an aesthetic impression, a flower is not only outside of us but also within us. Moreover, there is neither 'me' nor 'us', only causally dependent *dharmas* (phenomena) can be perceived. At the level of the ultimate truth, the reality is inconceivable and inexpressible. Therefore, there is no way through which we can describe the world, for example, with language. However, at the level of conventional truth, which can be expressed by using terms such as person and thing, beauty is a phenomenon which a person's condition depends on. We can understand beauty only after overcoming the dichotomy of subject and object. In Buddhist tradition, beauty can be perceived as a part of phenomena in the interrelated, ever-changing world.

Buddhistic approach to beauty

Whenever people think of beauty, they think mostly of physical beauty which is born out of proportion, symmetry, harmony, colours, delicacy, and many other factors. Physical beauty is a quality present in a thing, person or place that gives intense pleasure of deep satisfaction to the beholder. A beautiful thing must have an orderly arrangement of parts and also a certain magnitude. Since magnitude and

order impose physical beauty, thus a very small object cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused. Nor can an object of very big size be beautiful; because the spectator's eye cannot take it all in at once [6]. Physical beauty is obviously recognized by all humankind. However, there seems to be no absolutely fixed standard for this kind of beauty. The savage may conceive contours and shapes which are distorted as beauty. Semi-civilized man tends to regard fat and weight as the chief factors of beauty. Even civilized man varies in his individual estimation. What is beautiful to a Thai may not be beautiful to an African. Therefore, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' is a common phrase attributed to this kind of beauty.

In the time of the Buddha, Visākhā was known as a woman of physical beauty. That is, she was endowed with five kinds of beauty, namely beauty of hair, beauty of flesh, beauty of bone, beauty of skin and beauty of youth [7]. There are explanations of these beauties as follows: The hair is like a peacock's tail, and, when it is loosened and allowed to fall, reaches to the bottom of the tunic, where the ends turn and point upwards. This is "Beauty of hair." The lips are of a fine color, resembling a bright red ivy gourd, and are smooth and pleasant to the touch. This is "Beauty of flesh." The teeth are white, with even interstices, resembling a row of diamonds set upright, or evenly cut mother of pearl. This is "Beauty of bone." The skin, even without the application of sandal wood

perfume, or any rouge, or other cosmetic, is glossy like a blue lotus wreath, and white like a night jasmine wreath. This is “Beauty of skin.” A woman possesses youthfulness as fresh when she has brought forth ten times, as if she had brought forth but once. This is “Beauty of youth.” This is the concept of physical beauty of those days in India. In *Cuḷa Kamma Vibhanga Sutta*, the Buddha said that if a person is easily angered, full of hatred and ill will towards others such person when born among mankind will be ugly, deformed, disliked by others and will be considered as persons unsuitable for association. If, on the other hand, a person is not wrathful and irritated even by a torrent of abuse, when such person is born amongst mankind, will enjoy great physical beauty, and will be loved and appreciated by others [8]. Thus, according to Buddhism, anger and ill will result in ugliness and deformity whereas patience, loving-kindness and compassion are the cause of great beauty.

According to Buddhist point of view, life is subject to *tilakkhana*, i.e. *aniccatā* (impermanence), *dukkhatā* (suffering) and *anattatā* (selflessness) [9]. In the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the Buddha explained how life is perishable and painful. And that which is perishable and painful cannot be regarded that ‘*this is mine, this am I, and this is my self*’ [10]. This is Buddhist philosophy concerning life and the world. Therefore, Buddhism does not give importance to beauty which is external or physical. Things that look

beautiful only appear so. In reality they are characterized by *aniccatā* (impermanence). And as they are in a constant state of flux, they are the sources of suffering. External or physical beauty is short-lived, and it is not to be proud of.

It is a fact that physical beauty attracts one first, but Buddhism does not put a premium on it. The Buddha says that ‘*Beauty is nothing to me, neither the beauty of the body nor that that comes of dress*’ [11]. It is obvious that he does not give importance to physical beauty. If physical beauty which one is endowed with is not to be valued by the Buddha, how can he praise the beauty obtained by beautifying ornaments? According to Buddhism, there is nothing glorious in physical beauty. It is a snare that entraps man and causes him catastrophe. What we generally see in physical form is the five strands of pleasure like sights, sounds, tastes, smells and things to touch. These five strands of sensual pleasure arouse great passion and this is what physical beauty leads to.

Buddhism is regarded by some as an anti-hedonistic movement; however, it can inspire a great and sustained art-tradition. 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 [12]. 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 [13]. 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 [14]. 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 [15]. 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.

In general, 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.

Beauty, Buddhism maintains, if one does not understand the true nature of objects of beauty, may lead to grief and disappointment. It distorts values and upsets the standards of judgment. When beauty is limited to physical things, the persons, who possess it, always tend to have greed and pride. If such things are not common and are not easily obtained, a man may be called upon to engage himself in

eternal struggle to safeguard his exclusive possessions. On the other hand, those who have set unlimited values on their coveted objects of beauty, but are not fortunate enough to possess them, will need great strength and courage to resist their feelings of jealousy towards those who have the good fortune to possess them. The world is full of beauty in a very spiritual and an abstract sense, but it is the man himself who defiles and destroys that beauty by trying to possess it. Thus, Buddha's advice is to get detached from the beauty of the external world, which pleases the physical eyes. And to cultivate non-attachment to it would result in realizing the supreme beauty within the mind. This is the moral or spiritual and inward beauty. Therefore, the Buddhistic concept of beauty is not different from the ideal of the highest good. One who achieves the *summum bonum* of life is really beautiful. That is to say, what is morally and ethically good is beautiful [16]. One who has virtue, practices meditation and attains wisdom is also beautiful.

There are many references in the *Tipitaka* where Buddhist attitude towards physical beauty is revealed. To Abhirupanandā, who was infatuated with her physical beauty characterized by perfect form, and who would not go to the Buddha even when he wanted her to come for instruction, the Buddha proved the transitoriness of physical beauty by conjuring up a more beautiful woman and showing her becoming aged and fading. The

sight caused anguish in the mind of Abhirupanandā, and she became disillusioned [17]. Aḍḍhakāśī, like Abhirupanandā, was proud of her beauty, but when she attained real knowledge, physical beauty had no importance for her. On several occasions, Buddha has directed the attention of his disciples to physical beauty in order to communicate religious truths, and as a medium to ennoble the crude emotional feelings in them. For instance, in the *Udāna-pāli*, the Buddha has compared the beauty of the nymphs with that of Nanda's former fiancée, and Nanda then compared her to a burnt she-monkey with mutilated ears and nose [18]. Thereafter he promised to lead a holy life and eventually attained enlightenment. In another episode, Khema, who was infatuated by her own beauty, having seen a far more beautiful nymph conjured by the Buddha, passing from youth to old age, falling down and dying before her eyes, realized the vanity of her pride. These incidents reveal that Buddhism has given an ethical and spiritual dimension to what is beautiful.

Therefore, whether one is beautiful or not is judged not only by his physical looks, but also by his actions, by human qualities with which he is endowed. A person may have perfect figure; but he may be cruel and cantankerous. Instead of doing goodness to society, he may always think of doing harm to it, and he may even go to the length of caring only for himself. How can such a person be regarded as beautiful? The Buddha looks for beauty in

human beings. He does not take beauty separately and differently from beautiful objects or beautiful human beings. Nevertheless, he does not conceive one as beautiful by physical look. According to him, beauty is an ethical concept, and one who is ethically good, one who has got rid of craving, aversion and ignorance and made his own mind free from all kinds of defilements is truly beautiful. A person, who is goaded by ill-will and anger, ruffled and disturbed by sensuous desires, is the most ugly to look at. He may be physically beautiful in look, but as long as he is a slave to *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*, he is not really beautiful. Real beauty comes to a person when he destroys *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* and annihilates his protean sensuous desires. An individual is capable enough to attain ethical and spiritual beauty by walking on the path of *sīla*, *smādhi* and *paññā*. He can extirpate all mental defilements that make him ugly. Thus, it is clear that beauty in Buddhism is not a matter of 'symmetry, harmony and proportion', but it is a matter of what one possesses within. Does one have qualities like love, compassion and sympathy etc.? Is one free from anger, hatred and other defilements? If he has these qualities and is free from all defilements, he is really beautiful although he may not have external symmetry, harmony and proportion.

Conclusion

From what has been mentioned earlier, it is found that *aniccatā* (impermanence) and

śūnyatā (emptiness) are the doctrines which mostly make one think that the concept of beauty does not exist in Buddhism. However, it has been made clear that by these two doctrines Buddhism does not deny the beauty. Furthermore, it has provided a different approach to understanding of beauty. That is, from the point of view of *aniccatā*, beauty is the product of human creativity or artifice; it is not an inherent property of a given object [19]. And from the point of view of *śūnyatā*, beauty is aesthetic impression. According to Buddhism, beauty is neither a fixed concept nor a quality which can exist eternally. It can be perceived as a part of phenomena in the interrelated, ever-changing world. Thus, Buddhists neither avoid objects of beauty nor run away from them. They only refrain from making them the basis for strong and individuated likes and dislikes. Whatever there is in the world, pleasant and lovable, we are usually attached to them, and we develop a dislike towards their opposites. In other words, Buddhism does talk about physical beauty, but it does not pay much attention to it. Buddhists recognize beauty where the senses can perceive it. However, in beauty they also see its change and destruction. They remember what the Buddha said with regard to all component things, that they come into being, undergo change and perish. Therefore, the wise man acquires a greater depth of vision. His admiration is not colored by a greed for acquisition and possession. The disciples of the Buddha understood this and proved it in their own lives. Therefore, the

primary aesthetic concept at the heart of Buddhist culture is the aspiration of leading a holy life. Beauty is not for beauty's sake. It has been viewed as an incentive for those who aspire to the holy life. And a life well lived from the point of view of Buddhist ethics will constitute inward beauty. A man, who gets rid of all kinds of impurities and has developed an insight into the real nature of things, is the embodiment of truth, beauty and goodness. The real concept of beauty is not a matter of symmetry, harmony and proportion, but it is a matter of what one possesses within. By ethicizing the concept of beauty and making it more a matter of inside than of outside, Buddhism has propounded a universal theory of beauty.

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