

Buddhist Aesthetics?*

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The Buddha often spoke of the dangers of sensual pleasure, and this attitude has had considerable influence on all Buddhist traditions. The few allusions to the beauties of nature in the Pali canon mainly appreciate how they induce tranquility. In the works of man, utility and costliness were appreciated, but apparently what we consider beauty was not prized for its own sake. However, offerings to the Buddha, e.g. to his image, should be as fine as possible. The value of any Buddhist offering, as indeed of any Buddhist act, is judged by its motive, and the finer the offering, the better, in as much as it shows that every effort has been made. This is not really an aesthetic, but rather an attitude to art, namely, that like any beautiful object it should serve to convey a Buddhist message.

Is there such a thing as a Buddhist aesthetics?

I have recently heard it argued that there is no such thing as Buddhist art. The proponents of this view, professional art historians, were claiming that there is Indian art, Chinese art, Thai art, etc. etc., but no such thing – that is, no such fit object of study – as Buddhist art. Since it is undeniable that there is a great deal of visual art obviously connected to Buddhist practices and even to Buddhist ideas, and indeed one can usually decide whether a piece of art is so connected or not, this seems to me to fly in the face of common sense. The strange claim did however set me wondering whether there is such a thing as a Buddhist *theory* of art: is there a Buddhist aesthetics? Perhaps this merits investigation.

*This paper was read (somewhat abbreviated) at the Spalding Symposium held in Oxford in honour of Karel Werner in April 2011, and was intended for publication in his Festschrift. Since that is much delayed, Dr Werner has kindly agreed to my publishing it here.

The dangers of sensual pleasure

If one looks at the earliest texts, there certainly does seem to be a Buddhist attitude to visual art – and it is largely negative.

Let me begin by quoting what Dr Raja De Silva calls the “Buddhist theory of painting”.

“On viewing a painting, the eye would perceive – through colour and the changes of colour, and the confining of colour by the means of line, i.e., form – certain images which would give rise within the mind to visual consciousness. The meeting of visual consciousness, i.e., perceptual awareness, the eye, and material awareness (i.e., shapes of the painting) give rise to sensory experience, i.e., contact. From this arise feelings – for example the “taste” of a painting may be pleasurable; what one feels, one perceives; for example, the mind recognizes the nature of the painting; what is perceived is reasoned about; the mind of the viewer is brought to bear on the painting (i.e., on the object), and he makes a judgment because there arises a concept within his consciousness in relation to the painting, i.e., the mind generates the form of thought through which the object is determined. The concept or thought is also called *vitakka* (Skt. *vitarka*) in Buddhist teachings; awareness proliferates conceptually (*papañca*). Thus, the contemplation of a painting would result in the receiving of a conceptual proliferation, or a message, in the mind. The purpose of a painting (seen both with the eye and the mind) is to convey a message to the viewer.”¹

Except for the first and last sentence quoted, the above reproduces what is said in the Pali Canon in the *Madhupinḍika Sutta*.² What it omits, however, is that the *sutta* says that conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) is thoroughly undesirable, for it

¹Raja De Silva, *Sigiriya Paintings*, [published by the author], Sri Lanka, 2009, p.48. The author acknowledges an article by K. Abhayawansa, but that article simply reproduces a primary source (see below). I have omitted some Pali terms given in brackets.

²*M sutta* 18. The relevant passage in the original is at *M I.111-2*, but because the PTS edition abbreviates the repetitions, one needs to go back to pp.109-110 to see the word *papañca* and what follows it. This passage has been much discussed by modern scholars, but to my mind not conclusively. On *papañca* see my *What the Buddha Thought* (Equinox, London, 2009), pp.205-6.

leads to all kinds of bad emotions and even to aggressive behaviour; the Buddha is explaining its origin in order to show monks how to get rid of it.³

We can put the matter even more simply and more baldly. The Pali Canon contains a famous short text called the *Puṇṇovāda Sutta*,⁴ in which a monk called Puṇṇa decides that he wants to go and live in a remote area to the west, apparently as a missionary. He comes and asks the Buddha to give him a short talk on the *dhamma* so that he can go and live away by himself, thinking about it. The sermon the Buddha gives him is extremely simple. “There are sights discernible to the eye which are likeable, desirable, pleasing, pleasant, connected to sense pleasure, stimulating. If a monk welcomes them, finds pleasure in them and clings to them, delight arises in him. I declare, Puṇṇa, that from the arising of delight comes the arising of suffering.” The Buddha then says the identical thing about the ear and sounds, about the nose and smells, about the tongue and tasting, about the body and touching, and about the mind and thoughts. He then goes on to say the converse: that if the monk takes no pleasure in those perceptions, his delight is stopped, and from the stopping of delight comes the stopping of suffering. That is the whole sermon, the whole message. Puṇṇa appears to find it perfectly satisfactory, and indeed it leads indirectly to his attaining nirvana.

Anyone who has dipped into the Pali Canon will have discovered that the message here given to Puṇṇa is perhaps the commonest one of all. The brief term for it is *indriya-saṃvara*, “restraint of the senses”. It simply says that one should avoid any emotional reaction, whether positive or negative, to the data supplied by the senses. (We need not bother here with the fact that the mind is categorised as a sixth sense.) Emotions, both positive and negative, are what give rise to suffering, *dukkha*, as stated in the second Noble Truth. As a corollary, *dukkha* comes to an end when these emotions are eliminated.

One way of ensuring that sense impressions do not induce any emotions would be to avoid having any sense impressions at all, but the Buddha clearly states that that is not what he means. On hearing that a brahmin called Pārāsariya teaches his followers not to see and not to hear, and calls that “development of the faculties” (*indriya-bhāvanā*), he says that in that case a blind man and a deaf man would have developed faculties. What the Buddha teaches his own disciples is so

³This is no criticism of Raja De Silva, for whose purpose the point is not relevant. On the contrary, I have chosen to quote him in order to draw attention to his book, which I find admirable. In fact, it is quite one of the finest publications in Buddhist art history I have come across. De Silva’s discoveries deserve to be much better known.

⁴M *sutta* 145. All my translations omit some exact repetitions.

to develop their minds that they recognise all sensations, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neither, which arise from use of the senses, for what they are, and to turn away from them to find equanimity.⁵

The first stage of mental preparation for the spiritual advance that will culminate in nirvana is *sati*, awareness. It is fashionable to translate *sati* as “mindfulness”, and I take “mindfulness” and “awareness” to be synonymous. The senses are to be alert and to take note of everything that is going on both within oneself and in one’s environment, particularly other people. Let me quote the paradigm text from the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

First the Buddha says that a monk must practise moral restraint, and defines this by giving a vast list of external things from which he must abstain. He goes on:

“Just as a noble who has been consecrated as king and has put down his enemies sees no danger from any adversary, so a monk perfect in morality sees no danger from any source because of his moral restraint. When he is equipped with all these noble aspects of morality he experiences flawless comfort in himself.

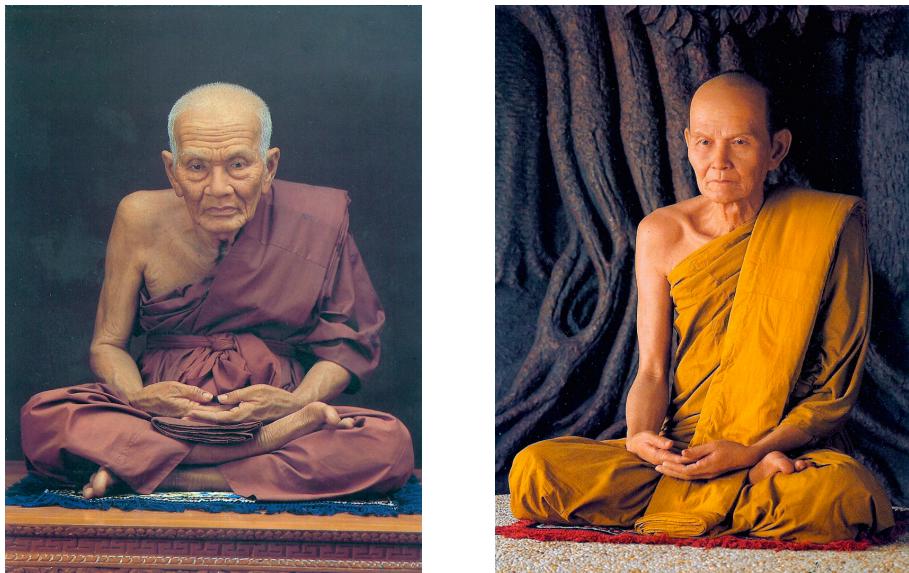
“And how, O king, does he guard the doors of his faculties? When he sees a form with his eyes, he grasps at neither its general character nor its details, but acts to restrain anything on account of which evil, unwholesome thoughts of desire or depression might flow in upon him if he stayed without restraining his visual faculty; he guards his visual faculty; he attains restraint of the visual faculty.” The same is said of the other five faculties, from hearing to thinking. “When he is equipped with all this noble restraint of the faculties he experiences undefiled comfort in himself.

“And how, O king, is a monk mindful and alert? He is mindful and alert in going forward and in coming back; in looking forward and in looking round; in stretching a limb and in contracting it; in eating, drinking, chewing and swallowing; in answering the calls of nature; in going, standing, sitting, in sleeping and waking, in speaking and remaining silent a monk is mindful and alert.”⁶

⁵ *M* *sutta* 152.

⁶ *D I* 69-71.

The same message is conveyed, in more detail, in the famous major discourse on mindfulness, the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,⁷ where after every exercise the text says that it is to be practised both with regard to oneself and “externally”, that is, with regard to others.



*Figure 4: Waxworks of two famous Thai meditators,
Thai Human Imagery Museum, Nakhonpathom.*

Aesthetics is about beauty. Can beauty be dissociated from sensual pleasure?

This fundamental teaching of the Buddha's – observe, but do not react – certainly conveys an attitude to visual (and other) art; but does it leave any room for aesthetics?

I take it that aesthetics is a kind of theorising that centrally concerns the creation and appreciation of beauty, and involves making judgments of taste and sentiment. Though its subject matter is not confined to works of art, it does deal with creativity, normally human creativity, and with the beauty which is then considered to be (or fail to be) a property of the result of that creativity. One philoso-

⁷ *D sutta 22.*

pher has proposed, for instance, that distinctive features of a work of art are: that it offers itself for judgment, appreciation and interpretation; that it gives pleasure which is not associated with other kinds of usefulness: and that it is “set aside from ordinary life and made a dramatic focus of experience”.⁸

I suggest that the idea of beauty in the Buddha’s cultural environment was inextricably associated with feminine beauty, and thus with sexual attraction. (If I present this matter entirely from the masculine point of view, it is because I am following my sources. Those sources are vividly aware that women are sexually attracted to men just as men are to women, but they do not discuss that in any detail.) If one considers a common word for “beautiful”, such as *sundara*, one thinks of it as applied not merely to a person but probably to a young man or young woman, or to such matters as clothing and ornament which enhance their beauty. I don’t think that a child is described by such a term, nor is an animal. I shall however return to the beauties of nature. My main point is that in that culture aesthetic beauty (created beauty) has an erotic overtone.

Though all the texts which propound it are centuries later than the Buddha, Sanskrit aesthetic theory provides corroborative evidence for my thesis. That theory originated in the context of the theatre, but was then extended to all literature and to the other arts. The aesthetic sentiment we experience on watching a play is related to one of the emotions we experience directly in life, but we experience it at a remove, in such a way that for the aesthete, who understands that this is not a direct encounter with real situations, even normally unpleasant emotions, such as fear and disgust, are transformed into something pleasurable. In the Sanskrit theory the emotions are classified as eight or nine; this is not important for the general theory, but does matter in our context.

There is a standard list of emotions, in which the emotion experienced in real life is paired off with the aesthetic sentiment which corresponds to it when we experience that emotion aesthetically. Thus anger corresponds to the wrathful sentiment, grief to the compassionate sentiment, fun to the comic sentiment, and so on – the correspondences do not surprise us. However, one correspondence is unfamiliar to our minds. The emotion which always heads the list, presumably because it plays the most part in drama and other imaginative literature, is love – that is, sexual love (*rati*). The corresponding aesthetic sentiment is called *śringāra*, which means “finery”, anything we put on when we are trying to look our best. It

⁸Denis Dutton, quoted in the article “Aesthetics” in the *Wikipedia*. I have used only three of the six criteria he offers, and changed his wording for the first two here listed.

is the only word in the list which has anything to do with beauty. Thus although the scope of the word *śṛṅgāra* is certainly far narrower than the scope of the word “beauty”, beauty is associated with erotic feeling. It is therefore hardly surprising that a religion which recommends detachment from worldly pleasures leaves little or no room for aesthetic enjoyment.



Figure 5: The Buddha resists the temptations of the daughters of Māra.
Mural, Mādavala temple, Sri Lanka, second half of 18th century.

This association of beauty with sexual attractiveness seems to have been strongest in the monastic community, composed as it was of people vowed to celibacy. Thus in early Buddhism we find a distinct drift away from regarding every object of the senses with complete emotional neutrality towards preaching that what we instinctively find attractive should in fact repel us. Two meditation exercises, both of them described in the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, become increasingly popular in the Sangha. One is the meditation on “foulness” (*asubha*), which consists of contemplating human corpses in ten stages of disintegration.⁹ This kind of extreme practice was possible in those days because the bodies of

⁹ D II 295-7. *Visuddhimagga*, chapter 6, *Asubha-kammaṭṭhāna-niddesa*, is devoted to this topic.

poor people, for whom cremation was too expensive, were often simply abandoned in charnel grounds. The other meditation, technically called “mindfulness occupied with the body”, consists of mentally reviewing the 32 physical components of the body, from hair to urine.¹⁰

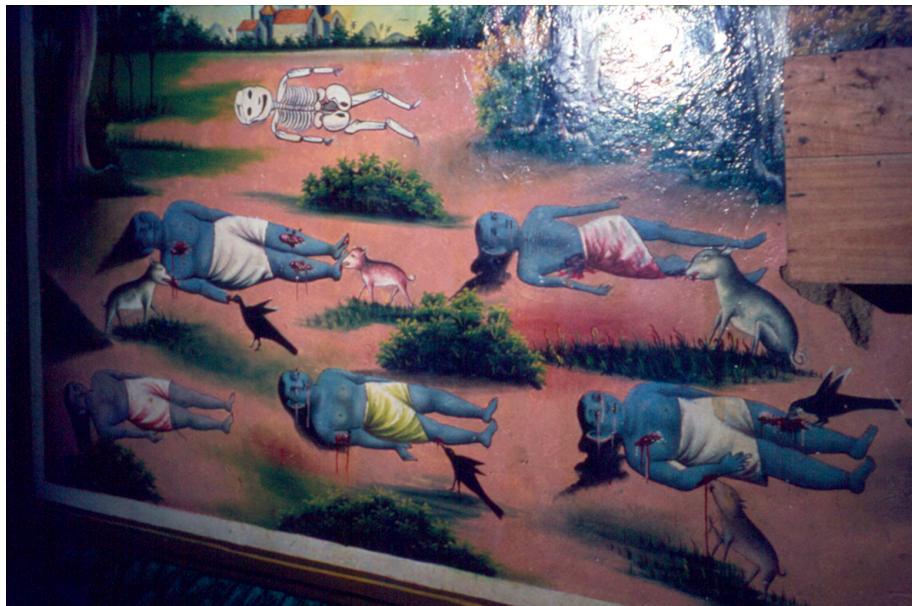


Figure 6: Mural of “the ten corpses” in Morapāhē village temple, Sri Lanka, 1945.

To illustrate this, let me use Buddhaghosa's 5th century compendium of Theravāda doctrine, *The Path of Purification*, even though Buddhaghosa draws his material for the most part from much earlier sources. Here is a famous anecdote from the first chapter; it comes under a section on “the virtue of restraint of the faculties”. It concerns an elder called Mahā Tissa who resided at Cetiyapabbata, just a few miles from the ancient capital of Anurādhapura.

“... The Elder was on his way from Cetiyapabbata to Anurādhapura for alms. A married lady of good family who had quarrelled

¹⁰D. II 293. *Visuddhimagga* chapter 8, para. 44ff. The Pali term for this is *kāyagatā sati*; but it is sometimes referred to, inaccurately, as the *asubha* practice, and thus confused with the meditation on corpses.

with her husband had set out early from Anurādhapura, all dressed up and tricked out like a celestial nymph, to return to her relatives' home. She saw him on the road, and her mind being in a whirl, she gave a loud laugh. The Elder looked up to see what it was, and finding in the bones of her teeth the perception of foulness, he reached Arahanthood. Hence it was said:

'He saw the bones that were her teeth,/ And kept in mind his first perception./ Standing on that very spot/ The Elder became an Arahan.'

But her husband, who was going after her, saw the Elder and asked, 'Venerable sir, have you by any chance seen a woman?' The Elder told him:

'Whether it was a man or woman/ That went by I noticed not;/ But only that on this high road/ There is going a group of bones.'"¹¹

I doubt that the Elder's boast that he did not notice whether it was a man or a woman in front of him would have impressed the Buddha favourably.

What, then, are we to make of the Elder Cittagutta (his name means 'Guarded in Thought'), who lived in the great cave in Kurañdaka?

"They say that in the great cave of Kurañdaka there was a lovely painting of the Renunciation of the Seven Buddhas. A group of monks wandering from one monastic dwelling to another saw the painting and said, 'What a lovely painting, venerable sir!' The Elder said, 'For more than sixty years, friends, I have been living in this cave, and I did not know whether there was a painting in it or not. I have just found out today through those who have eyes.' Apparently the Elder, though he had lived there for so long, had never raised his eyes and looked up at the cave. And at the door of his cave there was a great ironwood tree. The Elder had never looked up at that either, but each year he knew it was in flower when he saw its petals on the ground."¹²

¹¹I 55.

¹²I 105.



Figure 7: The Buddha's renunciation. Top to bottom: He leaves the palace at night, while his charioteer Channa hangs onto the horse's tail; he divests himself of royal robes and bathes in the River Anomā; he dismisses Channa and his horse, who bid him farewell;

Sakka worships him; he cuts off his hair; Sakka takes it in a jewelled casket.

Mural in Kaṇḍulova temple, Sri Lanka, late 18th century(?).

This story of Cittagutta is the only one that concerns a work of art. I know of nothing in the Canon itself concerning works of art. Many centuries later, monks and nuns are recorded as having composed Buddhist works of art in and for temples. I have done no research on this, but I would not be surprised to find that it was true of every major Buddhist tradition. I shall however suggest below that this activity is seen as an act of homage, and also in some cases as tantamount to preaching, since it conveys Buddhist material to the onlooker, but that it has nothing to do with aesthetics.

Non-erotic beauty did exist, but only outside the realm of representational art.

The strictures on indulging the senses, and avoidance of the erotic, apply most obviously to the Sangha, but in so far as all Buddhists have, at least in theory, committed themselves to similar spiritual ideals, they do form part of a general Buddhist ethos which, despite all variations of culture, time and place I think survives in some form in every Buddhist tradition.

I suggest that in the culture of early Buddhism the idea of beauty in the abstract was absent. I mean that there was no idea, as we have it, of such a thing as beauty of design. For example, they would never have thought of a building as beautiful or ugly. (Whether this applies even to builders and architects I cannot say: we have no evidence for their opinions.) Beauty for Buddhists, and I guess for most other people too, lay in certain kinds of objects and situations. A woman, I have suggested, might well be beautiful. So might the flowers in her hair. But what about flowers in general? What about what we think of as the beauties of nature?

I suggest that it was all a matter of association. I have said that the most obviously beautiful things had erotic overtones – which meant that their appreciation was a distinct danger to spiritual progress. But another kind of reaction to nature was also possible. In later Indian aesthetics this became known as the *sānta rasa*, the aesthetics of tranquillity. Beautiful natural surroundings could instigate and develop serenity; we may categorise serenity as an emotion, but for the Buddhists it is a benign state superior to any emotion. Early in the third section of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*¹³ the Buddha calls the attention of his disciple Ānanda to the delightful atmosphere of a shrine he has come to on his travels. The Bud-

¹³ D II 102.

dha himself does not often refer to his natural surroundings, but there are quite a few such references in the canonical collection of poems by monks and nuns, the *Thera-therī-gāthā*. Let me quote a few verses, recalling that in India the monsoon is associated with tranquillity, because it brings relief from the extreme heat.

“522. When in the sky the thunder-cloud rumbles, rain falling in torrents all around, on the path of the birds, and the monk meditates in his cave, he finds no greater enjoyment than that.

523. When, seated on the bank of a river covered with flowers and garlanded in the many colours of the forest, he meditates happily, he finds no greater enjoyment than that.

524. When at night in a lonely grove, while the skies rain down, the fanged beasts give their calls, and the monk meditates in his cave, he finds no greater enjoyment than that.”

“527. Having shed their foliage and about to fruit, the trees glow like hot embers, lord. They shed light as though they were aflame. The season suggests so many feelings, great hero.

528. The trees are in bloom, delightful, diffusing their scent in all directions. They have shed their leaves, hoping for fruit. It is time to set out from here, hero.”

Beauty is here appreciated in a spirit which seems familiar to us. But we should remain aware that this appreciation is always associated with Buddhist values. To make an enormous leap from ancient India to Japan: I am reliably informed that the Japanese attach such enormous importance to the annual appearance of cherry blossom not merely because it is beautiful but also because it lasts for so short a time, thus reminding us that all beauty is evanescent: it illustrates the doctrinal principle of impermanence.

Moreover, the love of nature in the wild has what I think our modern taste would see as limitations. When the texts describe a garden in heaven, a paradise, it is not natural, but made of jewels and precious metals. When the Buddha was on his deathbed, he is alleged to have described to Ānanda how on this spot in former times stood Kusāvatī, the capital city of the emperor Mahā Sudassana.

“The royal city Kusāvatī, Ānanda, was surrounded by seven rows of palm trees. One row was of palms of gold, one of silver, one of beryl, one of crystal, one of agate, one of coral, and one of all kinds of gems.

The golden palms had trunks of gold and leaves and fruits of silver. The silver palms had trunks of silver and leaves and fruits of gold. The beryl palms had trunks of beryl and leaves and fruits of crystal....”¹⁴

And so on.

This shows that a craftsman could produce something which was considered beautiful, but the beauty probably lay not merely in the technical skill displayed but in such things as the opulence of the materials – associations with luxury which we might find aesthetically irrelevant.

I had a surprise when I did my fieldwork in central Sri Lanka, in a traditional Sinhala Buddhist environment of wonderful natural beauty. As I was walking through the countryside to visit some rural monastery, I would sometimes pause to admire the view and say to a local companion, “Beautiful!” (“*Lassanayil!*”) At this my companion would scan the view in some puzzlement until he found a specific feature, typically a man-made feature, which seemed to him worthy of comment, and reply accordingly, something like, “Yes, they put up that school building only last year.” I have no doubt that had his eye fallen on something made of precious metal, or some other feature that must have cost a lot to create, he would have assumed that my remark applied to that. This suggests to me that the appreciation of natural beauty which I have illustrated above has tended to be associated with a certain level of sophistication.



Figure 8: Paddy fields near Rangala, central Sri Lanka. Local eyes would pick out the small building in the centre of the picture as the sight worthy of appreciation.

¹⁴ D II 171. The passage is repeated on pp.184-5.

So how do Buddhists justify creating works of art?

The Buddhist attitude to beauty which I have outlined certainly does not amount to an aesthetic theory, though it could be adduced as a justification for not having such a theory. On the other hand, Buddhists have created many wonderful works of art. So how do they fit in? Is there a Buddhist justification for them?

Immediately after the passage which I quoted at the beginning of this article, Raja De Silva writes: “Since the theme of almost every wall-painting in Sri Lanka is the life or past lives of the Buddha, their purpose is to direct the mind of the viewer (devotee) to the theme, which is done in pure adoration.”¹⁵

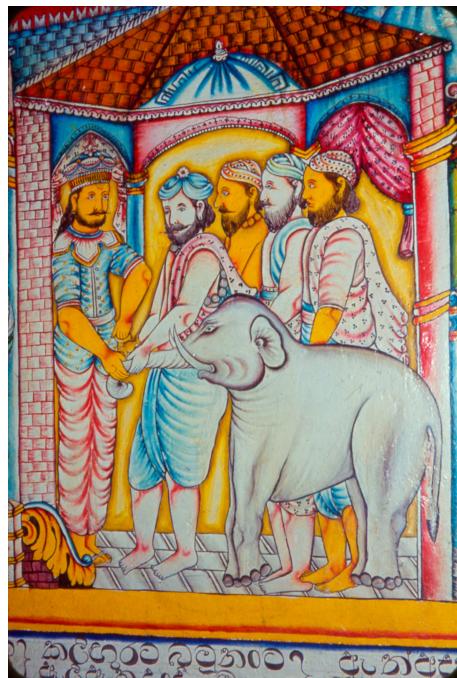


Figure 9: The previous life of the Buddha which is most commonly depicted is the Vessantara Jataka. The first scene which tends to be illustrated is when the future Buddha, born as a crown prince, gives away to four brahmin emissaries his kingdom's magic rainmaking elephant, the act for which the angry populace makes his father banish him.

Mural in Giddava village temple, Sri Lanka, 1906.

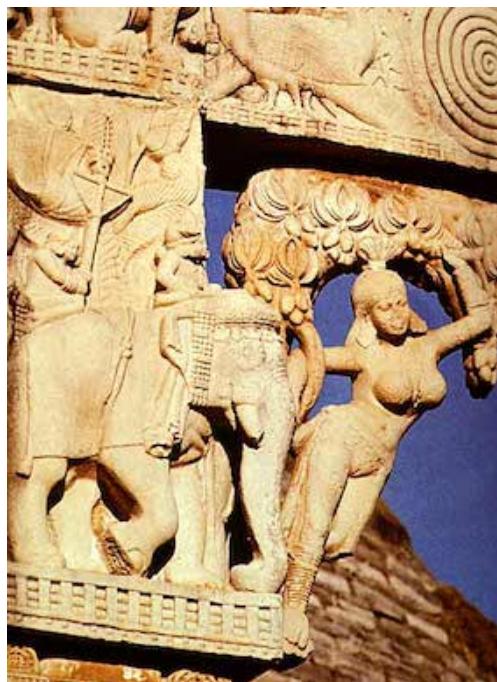
¹⁵ loc. cit.

Devotion has been a major part of Buddhism ever since its beginning. True, the Buddha shortly before his death exhorted his monks to rely on themselves alone, and this is coherent with his central teachings. In a text which there are strong reasons, in my view, for regarding as ancient and authentic, the Buddha says that “those who only have faith in me and affection for me are all bound for heaven.”¹⁶

Worship of the Buddha has always been carried out somewhat like the worship of a god – in India, of a Hindu god – and naturally this is modelled in part on doing homage to a king. He is to be offered beautiful sights, sounds, odours, even tastes. All this expresses the devotion of the offerer; it does not mean that the Buddha or his relic or whatever else is the object of homage actually enjoys those pleasures of the senses. When, for example, music is played before a Bo tree, no one thinks that the tree is appreciating the music. In fact, even when a Mozart mass is performed in a church, I doubt that many people think that the point is for God to enjoy the concert; it is rather that in honour of the Saviour of mankind one does one’s best to employ one’s talents. True, Christians are to believe that those talents have been given to them by God in the first place, and that constitutes a difference between Christianity and Buddhism; but that does not vitiate my point.

Thus the builders of a Buddhist monument like Sāñcī surely tried to make its architecture, sculpture and decoration as beautiful as possible, and those who came to offer flowers and incense no doubt tried to enhance that beauty – though we cannot know whether they would have put it in those terms. The beautiful decorations often included sculptures and paintings of attractive female figures, and in accordance with the customary dress of ancient India they were shown naked to the waist.

¹⁶ *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, M I 142. Heaven is of course a religious goal vastly inferior to attaining nirvana.



*Figure 10: Detail of sculpture at Sāñcī, central India, 1st century BC(?)
The almost naked woman is held to be some kind of tree spirit.*

Monks, nuns and other pious Buddhists were however not to think of their potential eroticism. They did not have to go so far as the elder Cittagutta, who never even set eyes on the paintings in his cave; but they were not supposed to feel any attachment or attraction to whatever they saw in a Buddhist religious context. Though in later centuries they inspired lay visitors to write erotic graffiti, I believe that the same is true even of the beautiful ladies painted on the great rock of Sigiriya in Sri Lanka, for Raja de Silva has shown that they were probably intended to represent forms of Tārā, the personification of salvific power in tantric Buddhism.¹⁷

¹⁷“... the intention of the artist was to induce the beholder to piously believe in the true beauty of the divine Tara, the Saviouress. The Paintings of innumerable Taras on the western and northern faces of the Remembrance Rock, Sihigiri, which the devotee sees while continuing the ascent to the summit, were calculated to assist in the religious contemplation on, and identification with, the goddess ...” Raja de Silva, *Sigiriya and its Significance*, Bibliothèque (PVT) Ltd., Nawala, Sri Lanka, 2002, p. 118.



Figure 11: Tārā, Sigirya, Sri Lanka. Mid 6th century AD.

Art as an offering.

The dichotomy between the creators and offerers of beautiful things on the one hand and their recipients on the other is crucial. Though the vast majority of Buddhist works of art before modern times were created by artists whose identity is unknown to us, we do know that some monks have been painters, even in Theravada countries. In Tibet, of course, monks may become professional painters of *thankas*, scroll paintings.



Figure 12: The Buddha when born as Vessantara (see caption 6) gives away first the rainmaking elephant and then later his carriage and horses. Mural painted by a monk, Degaldoruwa cave temple, near Kandy, Sri Lanka, late 18th century.

Perhaps the same distinction between producer and consumer explains how it is that in some Buddhist traditions, notably in Tibet, monks perform sacred Buddhist dances and even religious plays. It is a rule in all Buddhist traditions, so far as I know, that monks are not allowed to watch dancing or similar shows and not allowed to listen to vocal or instrumental music. However, in modern times radio and television have run a coach and horses through this barrier, and now of course everyone has the Internet. I must leave that aside. (Indeed, the question of what rules exist and the question to what extent they are followed always have to be distinguished in analysis.) I surmise, however, that in Tibetan tradition the monastic dancers were primarily performing homage, even if it happened to be instructive and entertaining, and thus were acting in the same spirit as those who painted *thankas* or drew huge *mandalas* in coloured sands.

Much Buddhist art, therefore, is created in a spirit of devotion. Fundamental to the Buddha's teaching is his dictum that the ethical value of any act lies in the intention behind it.¹⁸ Again and again, in explaining Buddhism, one finds oneself tracing things back to this principle. The devotion in the mind of the worshipper inspires her to offer whatever she considers a worthy offering, whatever its qualities in the eyes of others: whether it is beautiful, or skilfully made, or more costly than she can afford, is not ultimately relevant. The intention to make the best offering she can is what will purify her mind and thus advance her on the path to a better rebirth and ultimately to Enlightenment. Though it has a completely different ideological basis, in terms of the spirit behind it I think we may compare it to the Christian impulse to glorify God by offering him the good things he has created, one's own talents included.

From pure devotion to its instrumental use.

There is another aspect of what we may surely call Buddhist art to which aesthetic considerations are completely irrelevant. Sometimes representations of holy figures are considered to be endowed with life and able to respond to the prayers of worshippers. There is nothing in Buddhist doctrine to justify this belief, which may appear to us to be unsophisticated, but holy images do thus play a major part in the life of some Buddhists.

How does Buddhist theory deal with this? Good karma always has two aspects. As just mentioned, it purifies one's mind and thus advances one on the

¹⁸ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III 415.

spiritual path towards nirvana. On the other hand, it may be used to acquire some benefit. In the latter case it is analogous to cash, because it can be spent, but only once. In this context, it is often referred to as “merit”. Worshipping holy figures may be seen as a way to acquire merit. In this context, images may even be treated as if they were alive, and thus able to appreciate the offerings made to them and to bestow favours like a god.

In Sinhalese Buddhism the tradition of treating a Buddha image as if it were alive is unmistakably signalled by the solemn ceremony of painting in the eyes, which completes the creation and installation of a major Buddha image in a shrine. I have described and analysed this ceremony in detail,¹⁹ and it has analogues in many (perhaps all?) Buddhist traditions. A little eavesdropping, however, can supply plenty of more humdrum evidence that images are treated as if alive by worshippers who pray to them, though in another context they would probably deny that this can be effective.

Though I believe that the custom goes back no further than the nineteenth century, it has become common in Thailand to make images of distinguished monks. These vary enormously in size. The smallest images, either in relief or in the round, are used as amulets, which can be carried around, worn round the neck, displayed in cars, or kept wherever else is convenient. Some monasteries contain gilded statues of former incumbents, typically about life size or nearly so. At the other end of the scale, there are a few colossal images set up in public places, where they are the centre of attraction for hosts of pilgrims and sightseers. These images are all used, and intended to be used, as objects of veneration; their worship, in Buddhist terminology, earns the worshipper merit; but this does not differ from what in general, cross-culturally, we call bringing luck. I believe that in the cult of such objects there are considerations relevant to their efficacy, such as what they are made of; but aesthetic quality is not one of those considerations.

¹⁹“The consecration of a Buddhist image,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 26/1, 1966, pp. 23-36.



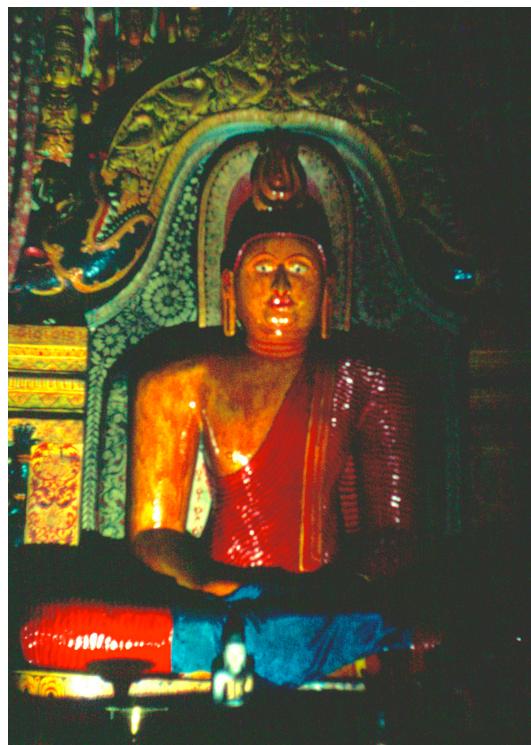
Figure 13: Four modern commemorative statues of monks from Chiangmai, Thailand. The first two are from Wat Phra Singh, the latter two from Wat Suan Dok.

Some of the statues in monasteries are fine pieces of portrait sculpture; but that is not their *raison d'être*. However, the Thai monastic statues remind me of the wonderful and apparently realistic statues of famous monks preserved from Japan, some as old as the eighth century. I have to confess that I do not know how they were intended to be used, nor do I know whether any of them were done from life; most of them were not.

However, I know of a fascinating case in contemporary Japan which casts light on how some, perhaps most, Japanese Buddhists view sacred images.²⁰ A temple in Tokyo, built in 1697, used to contain an eight-foot tall statue of the famous Bodhisattva Kan-non (Chinese; Kuan-yin). This was destroyed by bombing at the end of the Second World War. In 1993 a sculptor was commissioned to make a replacement and it was installed. Kan-non is the embodiment of compassion, but the incumbent priest and some parishioners felt that the expression of the new image was severe, indeed glaring. They commissioned a pupil of the sculptor to create a new head with a kinder expression, and replaced the original head in 1999. The sculptor's family sued for violation of his copyright, and won. However, the court, in an admirable compromise, rejected the request that his head be restored to the statue, saying that since the original head had been preserved and visitors could see it on request, it would sufficiently redeem his honour "to publish a notice explaining the course of events".

I have no picture of the offending image, but I can show you a picture of a Buddha image in a village temple in Sri Lanka of which I was told by the incumbent, with evident justification, that it was inauspicious.

²⁰I owe this information entirely to Kieko Obuse, who not only alerted me to the case but translated relevant Japanese newspaper articles for me. The main article comes from *Asahi Shinbun*, dated 25 March 2010, and is by Hiroki Mukai. This trial was an appeal by the plaintiffs and judgment was passed on 25 March 2010.



*Figure 14: Modern Buddha image,
Pitiyēgedara village temple, Sri Lanka.*

The true purpose of art: to convey a Buddhist message.

Since the treatment of images as if they were in some sense alive has nothing to do with aesthetics, the previous section has been something of a digression, though it serves to reinforce the negative answer to my question whether a Buddhist aesthetics can be said to exist. However, if we broaden the question to investigating the Buddhist attitude to art, I suggest a more positive conclusion.

Buddhist art mainly exists, I suggest, to convey a Buddhist message. If we interpret this broadly, providing images for worship can be seen as conveying the message of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, which the worshipper can contemplate – provided the image wears a serene expression. Sometimes the work of art is an object for contemplation in a meditation exercise, like a *mandala*, which

is a cosmogram; and contemplation of the Buddha is also classified in the Buddhist tradition as meditation. On the other hand, the narrative paintings which adorn so many village temples are more straightforward examples of instructing those who see them in edifying Buddhist stories. Narrative art in Buddhism, as in Christianity, may serve not only a decorative but also a didactic purpose.

Buddhist messages can and should also be derived from nature. For instance, I have shown above how in India the monsoon rain can convey tranquillity, and in Japan the cherry blossom gives an experience of the impermanence of resplendent beauty.

Veneration can be combined with other Buddhist sentiments. In Sri Lanka, Buddhists regularly make offerings before Buddha images, particularly before the main image in a shrine, and before the images which are nowadays found in many Buddhist homes. Probably the commonest of all offerings is flowers (or even a single flower); indeed, this is so common that the horizontal surface on which the image rests (as if on an altar) is called the “flower seat” (Sinhala: *mal āsana*). After laying the flowers on this altar, the worshipper recites a short Pali verse, which means: “I make offering to the Buddha with this flower, and by this merit of mine may there be release. Just as this flower fades, so my body goes towards destruction.”²¹

Thus the offering of flowers well exemplifies how a Buddhist image is there, as De Silva puts it, to direct the mind of a devotee to a Buddhist theme. Like Japanese cherry blossom, the flowers laid before the Buddha are to act as reminders of the transience of the body. Also like the Japanese cherry blossom, their natural beauty (not necessarily, note, the beauty of the image) is to give the worshipper joy (*prīti*). As I learnt from Sinhalese monks, “... despite the clear contrary implication of some of the verses recited for particular offerings, the general emotion felt to be appropriate to *pūjā* is joy.”²²

To conclude, I would suggest that the Buddhist attitude to art is to see it as a form of communication. Tolstoy wrote: “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by those feelings and experience them.”²³ The Buddhist view of art is close to this; but I

²¹ *Pūjemi Buddham kusumen’ anena / puññena m’ etena ca hotu mokkham / Puppham milāyati yathā idam me / kāyo tathā yāti vināsabhāvam*. The lines are of unknown origin, certainly post-canonical.

²² See my *Precept and Practice*, Oxford, 1971, p.118.

²³ Quoted in the *Wikipedia* article “Aesthetics”.

would reformulate it to say that for Buddhists art should perform the function of conveying the message of the Buddha, a message consisting above all, in this case, of certain feelings and emotions, but also the truths with which those feelings are associated. Creating empathy in the beholder is important, as it is for Tolstoy, but is not the whole story. As De Silva wrote,²⁴ “The purpose of a painting ... is to convey a message to the viewer.” I would not call this aesthetics, since for me “aesthetics” is concerned with beauty; I would call it a view of art or an attitude to art: that it serves to communicate the Buddhist message.

²⁴Quoted above. See fn.1.