

Theravāda Buddhist Perspectives on Aesthetics with Special Reference to Suttapiṭaka: A Comparative Analysis with Western Aesthetic Concept

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Abstract

This article examines Theravāda Buddhist perspectives on aesthetics through a close reading of the Suttapiṭaka and offers a comparative analysis with key developments in Western aesthetic theory. Challenging the widespread assumption that Buddhism adopts a negative attitude toward beauty and sensory experience, the study argues that the Theravāda tradition articulates a nuanced approach to aesthetic appreciation grounded in the distinction between harmful sensual craving (*taṇhā*) and mindful, non-attached engagement with aesthetic phenomena. Drawing on discourses across the Suttapiṭaka, including teachings on sense experience, poetic compositions, and the Buddha's own aesthetic practices, the article demonstrates that early Buddhism proposes a middle path approach to beauty that neither rejects aesthetic experience nor endorses indulgent attachment. Comparative engagement with Western aesthetic thinkers, particularly Kant and Schopenhauer, reveals both significant convergences, such as the emphasis on freedom from desire, and crucial divergences regarding the ethical and soteriological role of aesthetic experience. The study concludes that Theravāda Buddhism offers an affirmative yet disciplined model of aesthetics in which beauty is compatible with, and at times expressive of, ethical cultivation and spiritual development.

Keywords: Buddhism, comparative philosophy, Suttapitaka, Western aesthetic theory

1. Introduction

The relationship between Buddhism and aesthetics has long been misunderstood in both popular and scholarly discourse. A prevalent view suggests that Buddhism, with its emphasis on suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and detachment, necessarily adopts a negative attitude toward beauty and aesthetic experience (Harvey, 2000, p. 45). This interpretation fundamentally misrepresents the nuanced position articulated in the Theravada canon. The Pali texts, particularly those found in the *Suttapiṭaka*, reveal a sophisticated engagement with questions of beauty, sensory experience, and aesthetic appreciation that neither rejects these phenomena outright nor encourages uncritical indulgence in them (Gethin, 1998, p. 73).

The objective of this article is twofold.

1. To carefully examine what the *Suttapiṭaka* actually teaches about aesthetic experience and the appreciation of beauty across its diverse textual corpus; and
2. To comparatively analyze the Buddhist perspective of aesthetics with Western aesthetic theory.

However, this comparative approach is not to subordinate one tradition to another, but rather to illuminate distinctive features of each through careful juxtaposition. According to Western tradition, from Plato through Kant to contemporary philosophy, elaborate theories have been developed on the nature of beauty, aesthetic judgment, and the proper mode of engagement with beautiful objects. Buddhism has articulated its own understanding of how practitioners should relate to beauty and sensory pleasure.

Additionally, the Buddhist position has a crucial distinction in discussions of Buddhist attitudes toward pleasure, particularly regarding the distinction between *kāma* (sensual craving) and mindful, non-attached appreciation of beauty (Collins, 1998, p. 191). These distinctive features of Buddhist aesthetics can be identified in a careful investigation. The first leads to suffering through its insatiable nature and tendency to generate attachment, and the second represents a skillful engagement with aesthetic phenomena that can actually support spiritual development. This distinction, found throughout the *Suttapiṭaka* in various contexts and formulations, suggests that Buddhism offers not a rejection of beauty but rather a transformation in how beauty is experienced. However, the structure of this article proceeds as follows.

1. Section 3 reviews major developments in Western aesthetic theory, establishing the conceptual framework through which European philosophy considers the questions of beauty, taste, and aesthetic experience.
2. Section 4 explains the Suttapiṭaka, examining the texts that address aesthetic phenomena and exploring the Buddhist attitude to engagement with beauty.
3. Section 5 undertakes a comparative analysis, identifying both convergences and divergences between Buddhist and Western approaches.
4. Section 6 examines the affirmative characteristics of Buddhist aesthetics.

As the methodology, this article focuses specifically on the Theravada canonical discourses in the *Suttapiṭaka*. While later Buddhist traditions and commentarial literature offer additional perspectives, restricting the scope to the early discourses allows for more focused analysis of foundational Buddhist perspectives on aesthetics. Similarly, the Western tradition selected for comparison emphasizes major figures whose work has shaped aesthetic discourse, without claiming to represent the entirety of Western thought on beauty.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Buddhist aesthetics has developed gradually, often emerging indirectly within broader studies of Buddhist ethics, psychology, and art rather than as a distinct philosophical field. Early interpretations, influenced by ascetic readings of Buddhism, frequently characterized the tradition as hostile or indifferent to beauty and aesthetic experience. Such views are evident in both popular representations and early scholarly treatments that emphasized renunciation, impermanence, and the critique of sensory pleasure (Harvey, 2000; Kalupahana, 1992).

More recent scholarship has challenged this reductive interpretation. Textual studies of the Pali canon demonstrate that the Buddha's teachings do not reject sensory experience per se but consistently distinguish between craving (*taṇhā*) and mindful awareness (Gethin, 1998; Collins, 1998). Studies of the *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli* further reveal that liberated practitioners continue to employ rich aesthetic language, suggesting that aesthetic sensitivity persists in a transformed mode after liberation (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971).

Within philosophical discourse, David E. Cooper has played a significant role in articulating a Buddhist approach to aesthetics that resists the separation of beauty from ethical character. Cooper argues that in Buddhism, beauty is often expressive of virtues such as mindfulness, humility, and compassion, rather than being treated as

an autonomous domain of value (Cooper, 2012; Cooper, 2015). This interpretation aligns closely with canonical material in which aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from moral and spiritual refinement.

Ethnographic work by Jeffrey Samuels further supports this virtue-centered understanding of Buddhist aesthetics. His study of Sri Lankan monastic culture demonstrates how aesthetic practices, chanting styles, bodily comportment, emotional restraint, and ritual form function as cultivated expressions of ethical discipline and communal harmony (Samuels, 2010). Aesthetic form, in this context, shapes emotional life and social relations rather than merely providing sensory pleasure.

Comparative engagement with Western aesthetics has typically focused on figures such as Kant and Schopenhauer, whose reflections on disinterestedness, detachment, and liberation from desire resonate with Buddhist concerns (Guyer, 2005; Abe, 1985). However, as this study demonstrates, such parallels must be approached cautiously, attending to differences in metaphysical commitments and soteriological aims. By situating *Theravāda* Buddhist perspectives within this broader scholarly conversation, the present study contributes to a more precise and philosophically grounded understanding of Buddhist aesthetics.

3. Western Aesthetic Theory

Western aesthetic theory, as a distinct branch of philosophy, emerges from a long tradition of reflection on beauty, art, and sensory experience stretching back to classical Greece. While pre-modern thinkers certainly engaged with questions of beauty, the development of aesthetics as a systematic philosophical discipline is generally traced to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Nevertheless, understanding modern Western aesthetics requires beginning with its classical foundations.

Classical Greek Foundations: Plato's standpoint on beauty in dialogues such as the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* establishes enduring themes in Western aesthetic thought (Plato, 1997). For Plato, earthly beauty represents a reflection of transcendent Form. The transcendent form, introduced by Plato means the form of beauty itself exists in an eternal, unchanging realm, while beautiful objects in the material world participate imperfectly in this form. The experience of beauty, properly understood, should lead the soul upward toward contemplation of eternal forms rather than attachment to particular beautiful things. This movement from physical beauty to spiritual beauty, from particular beautiful objects to Beauty itself, structures the famous 'ladder of

love' described in the Symposium. Notably, Plato exhibits profound ambivalence about sensory beauty and artistic representation, famously banishing poets from his ideal city in the *Republic* due to their distance from truth and their capacity to arouse dangerous passions (Plato, 1997, pp. 1197-1223).

Aristotle offers a more empirically grounded account of aesthetic phenomena. His *Poetics* analyzes tragedy's capacity to produce catharsis. It means a purging of pity and fear through artistic representation (Plato, 1997, pp. 2316-2340). Unlike Plato, Aristotle emphasizes the value of mimetic art, arguing that humans naturally take pleasure in representations and learn through them. Beauty, for Aristotle, involves proper proportion, order, and magnitude. His naturalistic approach to aesthetic questions contrasts with Plato's transcendentalism, though both establish the idea that aesthetic experience possesses cognitive and moral significance beyond mere sensory pleasure.

Enlightenment Aesthetics: The systematic study of aesthetics as a distinct philosophical discipline began in the eighteenth century. Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term 'aesthetics' in 1735. The major architects of modern aesthetic theory are generally considered to be Kant and, to a lesser extent, Burke. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) distinguishes between beauty and the sublime. For him, beauty produces positive pleasure through qualities such as smoothness, gradual variation, and delicacy. And the sublime involves a negative pleasure born of terror, vastness, and power (Burke, 1757). Burke's analysis remains rooted in empirical observation of human responses to aesthetic phenomena.

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) represents perhaps the most influential work in Western aesthetic theory (Kant, 1790/2000). Kant argues that aesthetic judgment occupies a unique position between the realms of theoretical knowledge and practical morality. His analysis of the judgment of beauty introduces the concept of 'disinterested pleasure', which means that when judging something beautiful, the subject experiences pleasure that is not based on desire for the object or interest in its existence. This disinterestedness distinguishes aesthetic pleasure from sensual gratification or moral approval.

For Kant, the beautiful involves 'purposiveness without purpose'. It means, beautiful objects appear designed or purposeful without serving any definite concept or end (Kant, 1790/2000, pp. 106-108). Aesthetic judgment claims universal validity (the subject expects others to share the judgment) yet cannot be proven or derived from concepts. For him, beauty involves free play between imagination and

understanding, producing a distinctive pleasure that is both sensory and intellectual (Guyer, 2005, pp. 54-76). Moreover, Kant analyzes the sublime, which he divides into mathematical sublime (involving overwhelming magnitude) and dynamical sublime (involving overwhelming power). The sublime produces a complex response: initial distress at sensory limitations followed by satisfaction in reason's capacity to grasp the infinite or recognize moral superiority over mere physical force.

Nineteenth-Century Developments: Post-Kantian aesthetics develops in multiple directions. Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* examines an idealist philosophy of art. In his idealist philosophy of art, Hegel argues that art represents a stage in Spirit's self-realization (Shiner, 2001, pp. 118-125). For him, different art forms are architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry, and they correspond to various stages in the development of the Spirit. According to him, romantic art represents the highest achievement before art gives way to philosophy as the supreme mode of the absolute spirit's self-knowledge.

Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) offers an aesthetic theory. His ideas are deeply influenced by both Kant and Asian philosophy (Schopenhauer, 1818/1969). Schopenhauer posits that reality fundamentally consists of blind striving Will. For him, striving Will is an irrational force that generates endless suffering. Aesthetic contemplation provides temporary respite from Will's demands. When experiencing beauty, the subject transcends individual willing existence and becomes "pure will-less subject of knowledge," contemplating Platonic Ideas directly rather than particular objects serving personal desires. Art, particularly music, offers liberation from suffering through this transcendence of individual will.

Schopenhauer's theory offers insights in this comparative context, as he explicitly draws upon Indian philosophy, although scholars debate the depth and accuracy of his understanding (Abe, 1985, pp. 123-145). His notion that aesthetic experience provides a temporary escape from the suffering inherent in willing existence shows clear affinities with Buddhist themes, even if significant differences remain.

Key Themes in Western Aesthetics: Several themes recur throughout Western aesthetic theory as follows;

1. Aesthetic experience is generally distinguished from practical or sensual interest. For Kant, it is called "disinterestedness." This does not mean the subject is uninterested or indifferent, but rather that aesthetic appreciation does not depend on the object serving personal desires or needs.

2. Beauty is often connected to order, harmony, and proportion, though theorists disagree about whether beauty resides in objects themselves or in subjects' responses.
3. Aesthetic experience frequently involves a complex relationship between sensory and intellectual dimensions. It is not purely conceptual (which would make it mere knowledge) nor purely sensual (which would make it mere satisfaction of appetite), but occupies a distinctive middle ground.
4. Aesthetic experience often connects to larger metaphysical, epistemological, or moral concerns. Beauty reveals truth (Plato), involves freedom (Kant), or provides liberation from suffering (Schopenhauer). The stakes of aesthetic theory extend beyond judgments about art objects.
5. Western aesthetics exhibits ongoing tension between universalist and relativist tendencies. Kant insists aesthetic judgments claim universal validity yet acknowledges they cannot be proven. Others emphasize cultural and individual variation in aesthetic response.

4. Theravada Buddhist Perspectives on Aesthetics in the *Suttapiṭaka*

Having surveyed major developments in Western aesthetic thought, attention now turns to examining what the Theravada canon teaches about beauty and aesthetic experience. This examination requires careful attention to discourses throughout the *Suttapiṭaka*, avoiding both the assumption that Buddhism must reject all forms of aesthetic pleasure and the opposite error of projecting Western aesthetic categories onto Buddhist materials.

4.1. The Fundamental Distinction: Sensual Craving versus Mindful Engagement

A key distinction that influences Buddhist thinking about sensory experience is the difference between *kāma* (sensual craving) and non-attached awareness. *Kāma* refers not merely to sensory pleasure itself but to the craving for sensory pleasure. This craving constitutes one of the forms of *taṇhā* (thirst or craving), which the Second Noble Truth identifies as the origin of suffering. However, recognizing that craving for sensory pleasure causes suffering does not entail that all sensory experience, or all appreciation of beauty, necessarily involves such craving (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1843-1845). The Buddha's teachings consistently emphasize the middle way (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) between sensual indulgence and self-mortification. This

middle path suggests a mode of engagement with sensory phenomena, including beautiful sights, sounds, and forms that neither cling to them nor reject them through aversion (Keown, 2001, pp. 112-114).

The *Sigālakasutta* (D. 31), often called the "householder's code of discipline," provides significant insight into the Buddha's attitude toward sensory experience in lay life. While warning against six ways that destroy wealth, including addiction to entertainment in musical and dancing shows when pursued obsessively, the discourse does not prohibit aesthetic enjoyment (PTS 3.180-193). Rather, the Buddha counsels moderation and wisdom in engagement with sensory pleasures (Walshe, 1995, pp. 461-469). The sutta asks rhetorically about searching for various forms of entertainment not to condemn them absolutely, but to highlight the problem of wasting time, wealth, and energy in obsessive pursuit of pleasure rather than cultivating spiritual development (Guruge, 1984, p. 70).

Moreover, this nuanced approach appears throughout the canon. The *Indriyabhāvanāsutta* (M. 152) distinguishes between the untrained person's response to sensory experience and the trained person's response. The person who has an untrained mind, encountering pleasant sights and sounds, becomes infatuated and attached; encountering unpleasant sensory experiences, becomes averse and distressed. The person who has a trained mind, however, experiences pleasant and unpleasant sense objects without being enslaved by attraction or aversion (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995, pp. 1141-1145). This represents not sensory numbness but rather a transformed relationship with sensory experience, including aesthetic experience.

4.2. The Buddha's Attitude on Aesthetic Creation

A remarkable dimension of Buddhist aesthetics emerges when examining the Buddha's own role in promoting aesthetic creativity. As Ananda Guruge (1984, pp. 69-84) demonstrates through detailed textual analysis, the Buddha consciously employed aesthetic means in his teaching and actively encouraged aesthetic development within the monastic community.

The Theravāda *Vinaya* records reveal the Buddha's aesthetic sensitivity regarding monastic robes and dwellings. When he observed the attractively designed rice fields of Magadha, "laid out in strips, lines, embankments and squares," he suggested to Venerable Ānanda that monks' robes could be similarly designed (Mahāvagga, I.12). This aesthetic concern aimed to make robes better-finished products rather than haphazard patchwork. The Buddha explicitly praised

Venerable Ānanda's skill in creating various seams and pieces that gave the robe both functionality and form (Mahāvagga, I.12).

Even more significantly, the Buddha's injunctions regarding monastic dwellings reveal deep appreciation for aesthetic beauty. When a merchant of Rājagaha offered to build dwelling places for the saṅgha, the Buddha not only permitted five kinds of buildings but also expressed gratitude through verses praising “charming dwelling places (*vihāre kāraye ramme*)”. The canonical text preserves his poetic statement: “Therefore a wise man, looking to his own weal, should have charming dwelling-places built so that those who have heard much can stay therein” (*Cullavagga*, VI.1.2). The emphasis on beauty conveyed by *ramme* (pleasant or charming) suggests genuine aesthetic appreciation rather than mere utilitarian concern (Guruge, 1984, p. 72).

The *Vinaya* further records the Buddha's permission for whitewashing walls, using red chalk and black coloring for ornamentation, and creating decorative designs. The Buddha specifically allowed wreath-work, creeper-work, and other aesthetic elements while prohibiting only explicitly erotic representations (*Cullavagga*, VI.3.2). This careful balance demonstrates sophisticated aesthetic judgment that encourages beauty while maintaining ethical boundaries. The Buddha recognized that aesthetic environments could support rather than hinder spiritual practice.

4.3. The Buddha's Attitude of Literary Artist: Poetry and Narrative

Perhaps the most significant aesthetic contribution of Buddhist texts lies in the employment of literary artistry. The earliest and most authentic portions of the Pali canon reveal remarkable poetic skill. The *Suttanipāṭa* contains exquisite poetry whose aesthetic power remains evident even in translation (Guruge, 1993, pp. 190-195). The dialogue between the Brahman Dhaniya and the Buddha, each expressing preparedness for an upcoming storm. The *Dhaniyasutta* employs double meanings to express the joy of renunciation with charming words and sophisticated literary technique, both material and spiritual, in a poetic manner.

The Dhammapada's 423 verses demonstrate the Buddha's mastery of poetic composition. The Buddha employed various meters, many not found in earlier Vedic literature, and utilized vivid imagery through similes and metaphors (Winternitz, 1983, p. 5). Consider these examples from early chapters:

1. Suffering follows the evil doer as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the bull (Dhp. 1)

2. One who studies the Dhamma much but does not practice is like a cowherd who counts others' cattle (Dhp. 19-20)
3. The wise straighten the mind as a fletcher does an arrow (Dhp. 33)
4. Know the body to be like a pot of clay and the mind like a city and guard them with the weapon of wisdom (Dhp. 40)

The Buddha played with language using alliteration (“*anikkasāvo kasāvam*—one without removing defilements [wears] the saffron robe”, Dhp. 9) and created memorable phrases through sound patterns (“*cittaṃ dantaṃ sukhāvahaṃ*”—a mind tamed brings happiness, Dhp. 35). Being conscious of recitation as the primary means of transmission, the Buddha utilized sound effects alongside meaning (Guruge, 1984, p. 75).

The similes and metaphors throughout the four nikāyas reveal the Buddha's extraordinary ability to draw parallels from daily life. An extensive index of these literary devices demonstrates the range and sophistication of his aesthetic expression (Guruge, 1984, Appendix II). From nature imagery to craft metaphors, from animal behavior to agricultural practices, the Buddha transformed ordinary observations into vehicles for profound teaching.

4.4. Parable as Aesthetic Device

The Buddhist parables represent another dimension of aesthetic creativity. As Winternitz observes, “A parable is certainly no argument, but in the heart and even in the mind of the listener, a parable often has the effect which is more than that of a thousand arguments. Buddha was very well aware of this” (Winternitz, 1983, p. 68). The canon preserves numerous memorable parables:

1. The blind men and the elephant (illustrating partial knowledge) (M, 13)
2. The surgeon and the man wounded by a poisoned arrow (establishing pragmatic priorities) (M. 63)
3. The one-eyed turtle and the floating yoke (illustrating the rarity of human birth) (Sīmāvisodini)
4. The Buddha's realization of the ancient path to liberation from suffering, and uses the imagery of a fortress to describe the importance of mindfulness and wisdom in protecting the mind from unskillful states. (S. II, 104)

These parables combine narrative interest, moral instruction, and memorable imagery. Their aesthetic power ensures transmission across generations and cultures. The Buddha understood that the beauty of expression serves pedagogical effectiveness.

4.5. Poetic Expression and Spiritual Realization

The *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli* collections preserve verses by enlightened monks and nuns, demonstrating that liberation does not eliminate aesthetic sensitivity. These arahants describe nature vividly and express spiritual realization through poetic language. The repetition of terms like *ramaṇīya* (lovely) and *pāsādika* (pleasant) by those who have eliminated all craving suggests that aesthetic appreciation persists in transformed mode (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971). The verses display sophisticated literary craftsmanship. Consider Venerable Ekaviḥāriya's *Theragāthā* that, having come to the no-person place, the lovely woodland grove, I'll dwell there in concentration: lovely, delightful. (Thag, pp. 537-538)

Many verses integrate aesthetic appreciation with spiritual insight. Mountains wreathed in clouds, forests alive with birdsong, and the beauty of rainstorms appear throughout both collections. The enlightened ones express freedom through aesthetic language, using beautiful imagery to convey spiritual states.

Significantly, the *saṅgha* preserved these poetic compositions as canonical. The community valued not merely propositional content but aesthetic expression. Poetry employs particular rhythms, sound patterns, and imagery, creating effects that transcend mere information. The preservation of this literary artistry testifies to Buddhism's recognition of aesthetic value in communicating Dhamma (Guruge, 1993, pp. 195-198).

4.6. The Middle Way: Neither Indulgence nor Rejection

The Buddha's teaching of the middle way provides the overall framework for understanding aesthetic engagement. In the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*, he rejects both sensual indulgence and self-mortification, presenting the Noble Eightfold Path as the middle way between extremes (Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and Bodhi, 1995, pp. 1843-1847). This principle extends beyond ascetic practices to encompass the practitioner's entire relationship with sensory phenomena. However, applied to aesthetic experience, the middle way suggests neither pursuing beauty as an end in itself (leading to attachment) nor rejecting all aesthetic experience through aversion

(representing another form of clinging). Instead, practitioners cultivate mindful, balanced engagement with beautiful phenomena, neither swept away by attraction nor driven away by fear of attachment.

The teachings on sense restraint (*indriyaśamvara*) elaborate the principle of the middle path. Sense restraint does not mean shutting down sensory awareness or refusing to perceive beauty. Rather, it means not grasping at attractive features (*nimitta*) nor reacting with aversion to unattractive ones (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1254-1258). The practitioner sees forms and hears sounds but does not elaborate these perceptions into stories of craving or aversion.

The *Sakkapañhasutta* (D. 21) articulates this with remarkable clarity. When Sakka asks about restraint regarding sense faculties, the Buddha responds that forms cognizable by the eye, sounds by the ear, and all sense objects are "of two sorts: to be pursued and not to be pursued." The criterion distinguishes between engagements that increase skillful qualities and those that increase unskillful ones (Thanissaro, 1997; Walshe, 1995, pp. 319-330). This establishes that sensory experience, including visual beauty, is not inherently problematic. Some forms of aesthetic engagement may actually support spiritual development (Payutto, 1995, pp. 267-269).

Significantly, the same principle applies to joy itself: "Joy is of two sorts... to be pursued and not to be pursued" (Thanissaro, 1997). Joy that increases skillful mental qualities should be pursued. This directly contradicts simplistic readings of Buddhism as rejecting aesthetic pleasure.

4.7. Aesthetic Imagery in Teaching

Natural phenomena frequently serve as illustrations throughout the *Suttapiṭaka*. The Buddha employs beautiful objects as similes and metaphors. For example, lotus flowers rising unstained from muddy water symbolize purity amid corruption, the moon revealed when clouds disperse, representing enlightenment, the vast ocean receiving rivers yet never overflowing, illustrating equanimity (S.I, 189).

This pedagogical use of aesthetic imagery suggests beauty can serve wisdom rather than obstruct it. The *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhasutta* (M, 38) employs the metaphor of fire and fuel to illustrate dependent origination. In the sutta, a conceptually abstract teaching is made accessible through concrete aesthetic imagery. The *Himavantasutta* (S.V. 63) compares the improvement of seven factors of enlightenment in bhikkus' mind, using the cobras that live in the Himālya mountain.

The texts describing Rājagaha acknowledge its beautiful hills and pleasant groves. The Bamboo Grove (*Veḷuvana*), parks, lotus ponds, and flowering trees appear not merely as settings but as aesthetically significant locations. The Buddha chose beautiful environments for meditation and teaching. While these choices served practical purposes, the care with which texts describe these settings suggests genuine appreciation for their aesthetic qualities.

4.8. Beauty and Spiritual Development

The relationship between beauty and ethical-spiritual development in Buddhism differs from pure aestheticism but also from puritanical rejection. Beauty possesses instrumental value insofar as it supports or hinders the path to liberation. Yet the Buddhist tradition has extensively developed beautiful ritual forms, artistic representations, and literary expressions (Dehejia, 1997). Buddhist cultures created magnificent monasteries, sculptures, paintings, and texts characterized by extraordinary aesthetic refinement.

Beauty serves the Dhamma when it inspires confidence (*saddhā*), supports concentration (*samādhi*), or effectively illustrates teachings. The beauty of the Buddha's form, mentioned in numerous suttas, inspired confidence in his teachings. The thirty-two marks (*lakṣhaṇa*) of a great being, which are the physical characteristics of extraordinary beauty, far from being irrelevant to spiritual achievement, served to inspire confidence and demonstrated the fruition of past skillful actions.

As well as the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D. 16) associates the Buddha with establishing holy sites for pilgrimage such as Lumbinī, Buddha Gayā, Isipatana, and Kusināra (D II, 72-168). This injunction set in motion the development of beautiful religious architecture throughout Asia. The discourse also discusses the *cetiya* (shrine) and relic-worship, providing a foundation for distinctively Buddhist architectural forms. The *stūpa*, evolving from a simple burial mound to a sophisticated monument, demonstrates aesthetic creativity serving religious devotion across centuries and cultures.

4.9. Impermanence and Aesthetic Appreciation

A common objection holds that the teaching of impermanence (*anicca*) undermines aesthetic appreciation. If all beautiful things pass away, does not contemplating their impermanence diminish beauty or make aesthetic appreciation pointless? The suttas suggest a different relationship. Contemplating impermanence

helps to release from the attachment to beautiful things rather than eliminate the perception of beauty. The danger lies not in beauty itself but in delusion of permanence fueling grasping. The teaching of impermanence applies to all phenomena, not specifically beautiful ones. Recognizing that all conditioned things are impermanent does not mean cultivating indifference; rather, it means relating to phenomena with wisdom (*paññā*) rather than delusion (*moha*).

Moreover, the *Aṅguttaranikāya* contains numerous reflections on impermanence that do not counsel indifference but rather wise engagement. The famous simile of the oil lamp that burns brightly while fuel lasts, then extinguishes, applies to all conditioned existence (A. 7.47). Yet the lamp's beauty while burning remains real and can be appreciated without clinging to false permanence (Bodhi, 2012, pp. 1023-1024).

Indeed, awareness of impermanence can intensify aesthetic appreciation by revealing beauty's poignant transience. Many verses in the *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli* suggest this possibility. The beauty of blossoms is not diminished but becomes more poignant when one understands their inevitable fading (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971). One can appreciate a beautiful sunset while fully aware of its impermanence, without craving for it to last forever. The aesthetic experience, freed from attachment, may become clearer rather than diminished.

5. Comparative Analysis

Having examined both Western aesthetic theory and Buddhist perspectives from the *Suttapiṭaka*, comparative analysis can now identify convergences and divergences between these traditions. This comparison serves not to adjudicate which approach is "correct" but rather to illuminate distinctive features of each through juxtaposition.

5.1 Disinterestedness and Non-Attachment

Perhaps the most frequently noted point of convergence between Kantian aesthetics and Buddhist perspectives lies in their shared emphasis on a distinctive mode of relating to aesthetic objects. Kant's notion of *disinterested pleasure* and the Buddhist emphasis on non-attached awareness appear, at first glance, to converge upon a similar experiential stance. However, a closer reading of Kant reveals a more demanding and ethically inflected account of aesthetic experience than is sometimes acknowledged.

For Kant, disinterestedness does not signify an effortless or passive detachment. Disinterestedness, for him, is not a spontaneous psychological state but an achievement requiring the discipline of judgment. Rather, it presupposes a form of mental discipline in which the subject overcomes ordinary inclinations such as possessiveness, jealousy, prejudice, and personal association (Kant, 1790/2000, pp. 2-5). Kant explicitly acknowledges that achieving genuinely aesthetic appreciation, particularly in relation to works of art, is difficult precisely because viewers tend to import personal interests, cultural assumptions, and moral sentiments into their judgments. One reason Kant regards the appreciation of natural beauty as more readily accessible than that of art is that nature confronts the observer without intentional design or social rivalry, thereby reducing the intrusion of such distorting interests (Guyer, 2005, pp. 77-89).

This aspect of Kant's theory brings his position closer to Buddhist perspectives than is often recognized. Buddhist non-attachment (*anupādāna*) likewise requires cultivation rather than spontaneous adoption. The capacity to encounter sensory forms without craving or aversion arises from sustained ethical discipline (*sīla*), mental cultivation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). As the *Indriyabhāvanāsutta* (M. 152) makes clear, the trained practitioner does not suppress sensory experience but transforms the manner in which it is received (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995, pp. 1141-1145).

Nevertheless, important differences remain. Kantian disinterestedness functions primarily within the domain of judgment and concerns the conditions under which beauty claims can aspire to universality. Buddhist non-attachment, by contrast, is not limited to aesthetic judgment but reflects a comprehensive transformation of one's existential relationship to all phenomena. Moreover, while Kant regards aesthetic experience as revealing a harmony between human cognitive faculties and nature, Buddhist non-attachment is ultimately oriented toward liberation (*nibbāna*). Thus, although both traditions insist that aesthetic appreciation requires freedom from crude desire, the scope, depth, and soteriological significance of that freedom differ substantially.

5.2 Schopenhauer's Aesthetic Theory and Buddhist Meditation

Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory represents one of the closest points of contact between Western philosophy and Buddhist thought, a proximity reinforced by his explicit engagement with Indian philosophical traditions (Schopenhauer, 1818/1969; Abe, 1985). Schopenhauer characterizes ordinary existence as dominated

by blind, insatiable Will, generating pervasive suffering. Aesthetic contemplation, in his account, provides a temporary release from this condition by suspending willing and allowing the subject to become a “pure, will-less subject of knowledge.”

However, it is important to clarify that, for Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience is not the sole mode of release from the Will short of permanent liberation. Moral compassion (*Mitleid*) also represents a decisive interruption of egoistic willing. In compassionate identification with the suffering of others, the individual transcends self-centered striving and thereby weakens the grip of the Will (Schopenhauer, 1818/1969, Vol. I, pp. 372–379). This ethical dimension is crucial and brings Schopenhauer’s thought closer to Buddhist emphases on compassion (*karuṇā*) as a liberative force.

Nevertheless, fundamental differences remain. In Schopenhauer’s system, both aesthetic contemplation and compassion function within a metaphysical framework that posits the Will as ultimate reality. Buddhism, by contrast, refrains from affirming any such metaphysical substratum. The Buddha’s teaching consistently redirects attention away from speculative metaphysics toward pragmatic insight into conditioned arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the cessation of suffering (Gethin, 1998, pp. 135–152).

Moreover, while Schopenhauer assigns aesthetic experience a privileged role as a suspension of suffering, Buddhism does not grant aesthetic experience any unique soteriological status. Moments of release from craving can arise through mindfulness in any context, aesthetic or otherwise. Aesthetic experience may support liberation, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient in itself. Thus, while Schopenhauer’s theory offers suggestive parallels, Buddhist aesthetics remains embedded within a broader ethical and contemplative framework.

5.3 Intrinsic versus Instrumental Value

Western aesthetics, particularly from the Romantic period onward, frequently attributes intrinsic value to beauty. Beautiful objects or experiences are valuable in themselves, not merely as means to other ends. The doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake (*l’art pour l’art*)’ represents an extreme form of this position, but even more moderate views typically grant beauty some degree of intrinsic worth.

However, Buddhism’s instrumentalist approach can seem impoverished by comparison. If beauty only matters insofar as it supports liberation, does this reduce

aesthetic richness to mere utility? Does it miss what is special about beauty by always asking “what is it for?”

This criticism, however, rests on a misunderstanding. First, serving liberation represents not mere utility but the highest possible purpose from a Buddhist perspective. Contributing to the end of suffering and the realization of ultimate freedom is not a trivial or degrading function. Second, the sharp distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value may itself be problematic. Although the Buddhist tradition demonstrates through its practice, such as the creation of beautiful monasteries, images, stupas, and performing different types of beautiful rituals, that beauty matters deeply. Whether this is described as intrinsic or instrumental value becomes a semantic question once one recognizes that beauty serves the ultimate purpose of liberation.

Third, one could argue that Western aesthetics' attribution of intrinsic value to beauty itself represents a form of attachment, the very phenomenon Buddhism seeks to address. If practitioners cling to beautiful objects or experiences as valuable in themselves, apart from any larger purpose, they remain vulnerable to suffering when those objects perish or those experiences end.

5.4 Cultivation and Education

Both traditions recognize that aesthetic appreciation requires cultivation. For Western aesthetics, this appears in discussions of taste, aesthetic education, and the development of discernment (Kivy, 2003, pp. 89-115). For example, not everyone immediately perceives the subtleties of paintings in Sigiriya. Therefore, appreciation develops through exposure, education, and refinement of sensibility. Similarly, Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of awareness and wisdom, enabling proper engagement with sensory phenomena. Practitioners train in mindfulness, develop concentration, and cultivate insight into the three characteristics. This training transforms the relationship with all phenomena, including beautiful ones. However, the content and purpose of this cultivation differ. Western aesthetic education aims to develop discernment regarding beauty, the capacity to recognize and appreciate aesthetic excellence across different art forms and natural phenomena. It concerns becoming more perceptive of aesthetic qualities and more capable of sophisticated aesthetic judgment.

Buddhist contemplative training aims to develop wisdom regarding the nature of reality and eliminate mental afflictions causing suffering. Its concern is primarily liberation, not aesthetic discernment. If this training results in transformed aesthetic

experience (as suggested by the Theragāthās and *Therīgāthās*), this represents a consequence rather than the primary goal (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971).

5.5 Nature and Aesthetic Experience

Both traditions extensively discuss nature's aesthetic qualities, though with different emphases. The Western Romantic movement celebrated nature's sublime power and beauty, seeing in natural phenomena sources of profound aesthetic and even spiritual experience (Carlson and Berleant, 2004, pp. 23-45). Kant's analysis of the sublime involves nature's overwhelming magnitude or power (Kant, 1790/2000, pp. 128-159). Later environmental aesthetics developed sophisticated theories of nature appreciation.

The Theravada canon likewise contains extensive nature imagery and descriptions of beautiful natural settings. The *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli* feature rich descriptions of mountains, forests, rivers, and wildlife. The Buddha taught the dhamma in beautiful natural settings and used nature imagery extensively in teaching. As well as throughout the *Suttapiṭaka*, natural beauty is not seen as an obstacle to spiritual development but as potential support for meditation and insight (Gethin, 1998, pp. 68-73).

However, frameworks differ significantly. Western Romantic aesthetics often attributes quasi-mystical or spiritual significance to nature itself. Nature becomes a source of truth, a revelation of the divine, or an object of reverence in its own right. The sublime inspires feelings connected to absolute values, transcending ordinary experience.

Moreover, nature, in Buddhist imagery, serves different purposes. Nature provides suitable settings for meditation, illustrates impermanence and other teachings, and demonstrates aesthetic possibilities of non-attached appreciation. But nature itself is not sacred or divine in any sense, transcending the general interdependence of all phenomena. Mountains, forests, and rivers are subject to the same laws of impermanence and conditionality as everything else.

5.6 Ethics and Aesthetics

Western aesthetics has long debated the relationship between ethical and aesthetic value. Some positions, such as aesthetic moralism, hold that ethical flaws in artworks constitute aesthetic flaws; others, like aesthetic autonomism, insist that aesthetic and ethical evaluation occupy distinct domains. Kant connects aesthetics to

morality through his concept of beauty as the symbol of morality, that beauty serves as a sensible representation of moral goodness (Kant, 1790/2000, pp. 225-227).

Nevertheless, Buddhism does not separate ethics and aesthetics in the same way. The *Sakkapañhasutta's* teaching that practitioners should pursue forms (and other sense objects) that increase skillful qualities and avoid those that increase unskillful qualities directly connects aesthetic engagement with ethical-spiritual development (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997). Beautiful objects or experiences that foster greed, hatred, or delusion should be avoided, even if they possess aesthetic excellence by Western standards. Conversely, aesthetic experiences that support generosity, loving-kindness, or wisdom should be pursued.

This does not mean Buddhism reduces aesthetics to moralism in the Western sense. Rather, it reflects Buddhism's comprehensive vision in which all aspects of experience ultimately relate to the path toward or away from liberation. There is no autonomous aesthetic realm governed by principles independent of ethical and spiritual considerations (Harvey, 2000, pp. 42-65).

5.7 Pleasure and Joy

Both traditions must address the relationship between aesthetic experience and pleasure. Western aesthetics, particularly after Kant, distinguishes aesthetic pleasure from sensual gratification. The pleasure of beauty is 'pure' or 'disinterested', not based on appetite or desire for consumption (Kant, 1790/2000, pp. 89-92).

Buddhism makes subtle distinctions among types of positive feeling states. Happiness gained from sensual pleasure (*kāma-sukha*) differs from joy (*pīti*) and ultimate happiness (*parama-sukhaṃ*) arising from wholesome states of mind. The *jhānas* (meditative absorptions) are characterized by profound joy and happiness, yet these states are explicitly cultivated on the path to liberation (Bodhi, 2012, pp. 1526-1534). The *Sakkapañhasutta's* teaching that "joy is of two sorts: to be pursued and not to be pursued" demonstrates that Buddhism does not reject positive affective states per se, but rather discriminates between those supporting and those hindering liberation (Thanissaro, 1997).

Aesthetic pleasure, then, can be understood within this framework. If engagement with beauty generates craving, perpetuating suffering, it represents unskillful joy. If it generates delight without attachment, or if it supports concentration and wisdom, it represents skillful joy. The critical question is not whether pleasure arises, but what mental qualities accompany and follow from that pleasure.

In this context, Western aesthetics tends to focus more exclusively on pleasure itself and its distinctive phenomenological character. The aesthetic attitude involves savoring immediate qualities of experience rather than evaluating consequences. Buddhism's consequentialist framework asks different questions about aesthetic experience, though this need not eliminate the possibility of genuine appreciation in the moment.

5.8 Beauty as Expressive of Virtue: Buddhist Aesthetics Reconsidered

Recent philosophical interpretations of Buddhist aesthetics have emphasized that beauty in Buddhism is not merely compatible with virtue but often expressive of it. David E. Cooper argues that Buddhist approaches to beauty resist modern Western tendencies to isolate aesthetic value from ethical character. Instead, beauty is intimately connected with the cultivation of virtues such as mindfulness, compassion, humility, and non-attachment (Cooper, 2012; Cooper, 2015).

This perspective illuminates key features of the Suttapiṭaka material examined above. The aesthetic appreciation expressed in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* is inseparable from the moral and spiritual refinement of the speakers. The beauty of forests, mountains, and solitude is not merely sensuous delight but reflects a mind freed from craving and hostility. In this sense, beauty does not distract from virtue but manifests it.

Jeffrey Samuels' ethnographic study of Sri Lankan monastic culture further supports this interpretation. Samuels demonstrates that aesthetic practices within Theravāda monastic life, ranging from chanting styles to bodily comportment and emotional restraint, function as cultivated expressions of moral discipline and communal harmony (Samuels, 2010). Aesthetic form, in this context, shapes emotional dispositions and social relationships, reinforcing virtues central to monastic life.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Buddhist aesthetics cannot be adequately understood through models that treat beauty as autonomous or morally neutral. Rather, beauty operates as a lived, embodied expression of ethical and spiritual qualities. This aligns closely with canonical evidence showing that liberated beings retain aesthetic sensitivity precisely because it is no longer distorted by craving or self-centered desire.

6. Buddhism as Affirmative of Aesthetic Experience

Having completed the comparative analysis, attention now turns directly to the question that motivated this study: Does Theravada Buddhism present a negative rejection of aesthetic experience, or does it offer a viable path for aesthetic appreciation without attachment?

The evidence from the *Suttapiṭaka* strongly supports the latter interpretation. Far from counseling indifference to beauty or rejection of aesthetic experience, the canon demonstrates that liberated beings continue to perceive and appreciate beauty, albeit in a transformed mode. The *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli* provide clear evidence: these are verses of arahants, individuals who have eliminated all craving and completed the path, yet they describe natural beauty with evident appreciation and employ aesthetic language to convey their spiritual realization (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971).

The key to understanding Buddhism's affirmative stance toward aesthetics lies in recognizing the fundamental distinction between attachment and appreciation, between craving and awareness. The problem is not beauty itself but practitioners' grasping relationship to beauty. When people cling to beautiful experiences, demanding they continue forever, they create suffering for themselves. When beautiful things fade (as they inevitably do), suffering arises from their loss. When people cannot obtain beautiful objects or experience they desire, suffering arises from frustration. This suffering arises from craving, not from beauty.

The alternative Buddhism proposes is not the elimination of aesthetic perception or the cultivation of indifference to beauty. Rather, it is the development of non-attached awareness. The capacity to perceive beauty fully and clearly without grasping at it, without delusion of permanence, without mental elaborations that transform simple perception into complex stories of desire and identity. This mode of aesthetic appreciation remains fully available to practitioners, including being fully liberated.

The framework suggested in the Sakkapañhasutta provides explicit canonical support for this interpretation. When the Buddha teaches that forms cognizable by the eye are “of two sorts: to be pursued and not to be pursued,” he establishes that visual experience, including perception of beauty, is not inherently problematic (Thanissaro, 1997; Walshe, 1995, pp. 319-330). The critical question concerns whether engagement with particular forms increases or decreases skillful mental

qualities. Some aesthetic engagements support the path; others hinder it. The practitioner must discern which is which (Payutto, 1995, pp. 267-269).

This represents a middle way between two extremes that Buddhism explicitly rejects: sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Sensual indulgence involves pursuing aesthetic (and other sensory) experiences through craving, becoming attached to pleasure, and suffering when circumstances change. Self-mortification involves rejecting all sensory experience, attempting to eliminate feelings and perceptions, and treating the body and senses as inherently problematic. The Buddha's middle path acknowledges that humans are embodied, sensing beings who inevitably encounter beauty and other sensory phenomena. The question is how practitioners relate to these encounters.

Moreover, the Buddhist tradition's extensive development of religious art, beautiful monastic architecture, and refined literary forms demonstrates practically what the doctrine affirms theoretically (Guruge, 1984, pp. 69-84). If Buddhism truly regarded beauty as dangerous or irrelevant, Buddhist cultures would not have invested enormous resources in creating beautiful images, stūpas, paintings, and other forms of art. The fact that they did so, while maintaining rigorous contemplative traditions, suggests that beauty can serve rather than obstruct liberation.

The Buddha's own role as aesthetic creator merits particular emphasis. His conscious employment of poetic language, his encouragement of beautiful monastic architecture, his use of aesthetic imagery in teaching, and his preservation through oral tradition of verses characterized by literary excellence all testify to recognition of aesthetic value (Guruge, 1993, pp. 190-198; Winternitz, 1983, pp. 5-68). The *saṅgha* could have preserved only doctrinal prose statements. Instead, they carefully maintained poetry that aesthetically composed verses employing literary devices, vivid imagery, and beautiful language expressions.

Considering the implications, Buddhist discourses suggest that aesthetic sensitivity not only survives liberation but may even be refined by it. When craving is eliminated, perception becomes clearer. The liberated person sees things as they are, without distortions introduced by greed, hatred, and delusion. This might actually enhance aesthetic perception by removing the interference of attachment and aversion. Beauty can be seen more clearly when not obscured by wanting or fear of loss.

Furthermore, integration of aesthetic and spiritual dimensions in the canonical verses demonstrates that Buddhism does not compartmentalize experience into

separate domains. The same awareness that perceives impermanence can appreciate beauty. The same wisdom that recognizes non-self can employ poetic language. Spiritual realization and aesthetic sensibility are not antagonistic but can coexist harmoniously in the liberated mind (Norman, 1969; Norman, 1971).

However, the teaching on impermanence (*anicca*) deserves reconsideration in this light. Rather than negating aesthetic appreciation, awareness of impermanence can deepen it. Beauty becomes more poignant, not less, when practitioners recognize its transience. Spring blossoms are beautiful precisely in their brief flowering. Their impermanence does not diminish their beauty but rather intensifies appreciation of the present moment. But this does not mean cultivating sadness about impermanence. Rather, it means that a clear perception of things as they are, including their impermanence, does not prevent or diminish aesthetic appreciation. The liberated person sees beautiful things as beautiful and as impermanent, without contradiction. The awareness of impermanence removes the sting of loss because there is no attachment, yet the beauty remains fully present to awareness.

The Buddha's aesthetic presentations of the Dhamma demonstrate the tradition's recognition of beauty's pedagogical value. The discourses employ vivid imagery, carefully crafted similes, and literary artistry (Guruge, 1984, Appendix II). The Buddha could have taught in dry, purely conceptual language, but he chose instead to use beautiful imagery, such as the moon obscured by clouds, the great ocean, the lotus flower, and the skilled archer. These images possess aesthetic qualities that make teaching memorable and moving. Then, beauty serves wisdom.

Religious devotion in the Buddhist tradition likewise demonstrates an aesthetic dimension. Offering flowers at a shrine, contemplating a beautiful Buddha image, and chanting mellifluous verses. These practices engage aesthetic sensibility in the service of spiritual development. The beauty of the offering, the image, or the chant is not incidental but rather contributes to the practice's efficacy. Beauty inspires confidence, supports concentration, and expresses devotion (Dehejia, 1997).

The contemporary relevance of Buddhist aesthetics extends beyond academic interest. In a consumer culture that constantly stimulates craving for new experiences, beautiful objects, and aesthetic pleasures, the Buddhist framework offers an alternative: the possibility of appreciating beauty without the suffering that comes from attachment. People can enjoy beautiful music without craving to possess all the recordings of it. They can appreciate natural beauty without needing to capture and control it. They can experience aesthetic pleasure without demanding it continue indefinitely.

However, this mode of aesthetic engagement aligns with environmental concerns as well. If people appreciate natural beauty without possessive attachment, they might be more inclined to protect and preserve natural environments. The transformation from “I want this beauty for myself” to “may this beauty benefit all beings” shifts aesthetic experience from a source of individualistic acquisition to a ground for compassionate action (Cooper and James, 2005, pp. 112-135).

Moreover, Buddhist aesthetics suggests that liberation does not require aesthetic impoverishment. The fear that spiritual development means giving up beauty, becoming insensitive to aesthetic qualities, or living in gray uniformity finds no support in the Theravāda canon. The path leads not to sensory dulling but to sensory clarity precisely because it is not obscured by the craving.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined Theravāda Buddhist perspectives on aesthetics through a detailed analysis of texts from the *Suttapiṭaka*, placing these insights in dialogue with major currents in Western aesthetic theory. The findings challenge the persistent assumption that Buddhism advances a negative rejection of beauty and aesthetic experience. Instead, the Theravāda tradition articulates a sophisticated middle path in which aesthetic experience is neither uncritically embraced nor categorically rejected.

Central to this framework is the Buddha’s distinction between sensory experiences that are “to be pursued” and those that are “not to be pursued,” a distinction grounded not in the intrinsic nature of beauty but in its ethical and psychological consequences. Engagement with beauty that fosters craving and attachment perpetuates suffering, whereas aesthetic experience accompanied by mindfulness, non-attachment, and wisdom can support ethical cultivation and spiritual development. This principle is vividly illustrated in the *Theragāthāpāli* and *Therīgāthāpāli*, where liberated monks and nuns express profound aesthetic sensitivity through poetic descriptions of nature, demonstrating that liberation refines rather than extinguishes aesthetic perception.

The Buddha’s own aesthetic practices further reinforce this conclusion. His use of poetic language, vivid imagery, parables, and encouragement of beautiful monastic environments reveals a recognition of aesthetic form as pedagogically and spiritually significant. The canonical preservation of literary artistry alongside doctrinal exposition attests to the *saṅgha*’s valuation of beauty as a legitimate and effective medium for communicating Dhamma.

Comparative analysis highlights both parallels and divergences between Buddhist and Western aesthetics. Kant's notion of disinterested pleasure resonates with Buddhist non-attachment, though the latter is embedded within a comprehensive ethical and soteriological framework. Schopenhauer's account of aesthetic contemplation and compassion as forms of release from the Will exhibits striking affinities with Buddhist insights, yet Buddhism ultimately refrains from positing any metaphysical substratum analogous to the Will. While Western aesthetics often attributes intrinsic value to beauty, Buddhism approaches beauty primarily in terms of its role in the cultivation or attenuation of suffering.

Importantly, awareness of impermanence does not undermine aesthetic appreciation in the Buddhist framework. Rather, it can deepen appreciation by freeing perception from attachment and illusion. Beauty is experienced fully, yet without the demand for permanence. In this sense, Buddhist aesthetics offers a model of mindful appreciation in which beauty is perceived clearly, enjoyed without clinging, and integrated into ethical and spiritual life.

Far from advocating aesthetic impoverishment, Theravāda Buddhism affirms beauty as a meaningful dimension of human experience when approached with wisdom. This vision holds contemporary relevance, offering an alternative to consumerist modes of aesthetic consumption by demonstrating the possibility of appreciating beauty without possessive attachment. Buddhist aesthetics thus emerges not as a negation of beauty, but as an invitation to transform one's relationship with it.

Abbreviations

- A *Aṅguttaranikāya*
- D *Dīghanikāya*
- Dhp *Dhammapadapāli*
- M *Majjhimanikāya*
- S *Saṃyuttanikāya*

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Note: This reference list includes key sources for both Western aesthetic theory and Buddhist texts. All Pali canon references are to standard editions with PTS (Pali Text Society) notations where applicable.

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