

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljs.v7i1.10>

Buddhism and Natural Beauty in the Therāgathā

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Received: 19.11.2025

Accepted: 16.06.2026

Abstract

It is argued in this paper that the remarks in praise of natural beauty in the Theragāthā (Male Elders' Verses) are important for their contributions both to the theory of beauty and to understanding the place of beauty within Buddhist teaching. After introductory remarks on the suspicion of beauty expressed in some canonical texts and on the idea of 'inner' beauty, the paper examines two main ways in which, for the Elders, natural beauty is significant. First, it is a main reason why it is possible for the monks to find in nature a 'refuge' from a human world that easily arouses 'disgust'. Second, happiness in the presence of natural beauty disposes the monks to reflection and meditation. These considerations are important contributions to aesthetics, since they help to answer the question of why natural beauty is not only enjoyable, but something that deeply matters to people. They also help in understanding the notion of 'inner' beauty and, more generally, the roles of beauty within the Buddhist conception of life.

Keywords: beauty, meditation, nature, refuge, Theragāthā

1. Introduction

1.1. Beauty in the Pāli Canon

Reference books on Buddhism, such as the Oxford and Princeton dictionaries of Buddhism, do not generally contain an entry on beauty, while reference books in aesthetics, such as the Blackwell's Companion, do not generally have an entry on Buddhism. This reflects the relative paucity of remarks on beauty and related aesthetic concepts to be found in the suttas and other canonical texts. This lack of textual discussion has not prevented some authors from making very large claims about the importance of beauty in Theravāda thought. The Sri Lankan teacher of meditation, Godwin Samararatne, wrote that experience of natural beauty is the point of 'getting up in the morning' (2011, 62), while the translator of the Dhammapada, Juan Mascaró, held that, for the Buddha, 'love is beauty ... [and] to see the beauty of the universe is to see [the] truth' (1973, p. 20).

Such hyperbolic claims sound odd, given not only the lack of discussion of beauty in the suttas, but the suspicion of, and even hostility towards, beauty that the texts sometimes express. 'The sign of the beautiful is the nutriment for sensual desire', according to the Samyutta Nikāya (V, 2, 2), while for Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhimagga it is a source of 'greed, hate and delusion' (1991, p.752). Not all mentions of beauty, of course, are hostile. Queen Mallikā is informed by the Buddha, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (4, p.197), that she may expect to be beautiful in her next life as a reward for her moral piety. But remarks like this are likely to reinforce the idea that, while beauty may be a legitimate concern for lay people, it has no place in the life of monks and others on the path to enlightenment.

A common response to the charge that beauty is ignored or impugned in the texts is that it is only physical, external or sensory beauty of which this is true. The beauty that is admired in Buddhism, suggests Bhikkhu Bodhi, is not ‘physical beauty ... but inner beauty, the beauty of the mind’ (2001, p.13). ‘Real beauty’, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu agrees, ‘is something within, something in the mind ... it has nothing at all to do with external appearance’ (2008, p.128). Certainly, there are references in the texts to this ‘inner’ or ‘moral’ beauty. Asked ‘What is beauty for the monk?’, the Buddha replies that it consists in such merits as mental restraint, right conduct and awareness of ‘danger in the slightest fault’ (*Digha Nikāya* 26, p.28). The *Abhidhamma* contains sections devoted to listing and defining forms of ‘beautiful consciousness’ and ‘beautiful mental factors’, such as compassion and mindfulness (Nārada, 1993).

There is, however, something unsatisfactory in holding that the only beauty that is admired in Buddhism is an ‘inner’ beauty with which physical, external and sensory beauty has ‘nothing at all to do’. For this would make it hard to understand why the texts refer to (‘inner’ or ‘moral’) beauty. Why, for example, does the Buddha speak of the monk’s beauty, and not simply of his goodness or nobility? Why should compassion, say, count as a beautiful factor, and not simply as a morally virtuous factor?

The term ‘beauty’ has its basic and primary use in relation to what can be seen, heard or otherwise perceived through the senses. While there is nothing wrong with extending its use – and to speak, for example, of mathematical proofs, feelings, or moral virtue as beautiful – this is intelligible only if some connection is retained with the primary use. If these extended uses have ‘nothing at all to do with’ the sensory

and physical, then the term ‘beautiful’ must have separate meanings when applied in these extended ways. But this is implausible: ‘beautiful’ is not an ambiguous word. Moreover, it leaves unexplained what motivates the choice of the word ‘beautiful’ to express these separate meanings. Why, to repeat, talk of the monk’s beauty if all that is meant is that his is a life of moral and spiritual merit? (Cooper, 2017).

In order to understand the connection between ‘inner’ and ‘external’ beauty – and, indeed, to better understand the place of beauty in the suttas – let us turn to the text in which references to ‘external’ beauty, specifically natural beauty, are plentiful: the Theragāthā.

2. The Theragāthā and the Beauty of Nature

Along with such well-known texts as the Dhammapada and the Udāna, the Theragāthā (The Verses of the Male Elders) belongs in the Khuddaka Nikāya (Miscellaneous Collection). It consists of nearly 1300 verses, composed by 264 monks probably between the mid-5th and the mid-3rd centuries BCE. A salient theme in the text – not prominent elsewhere in the canon – is that of natural beauty. Verse after verse celebrates the beauty of forests, groves, rivers, rocks, crags, peacocks, deer, cloud formations, and much else. (See, for example, vv. 13, 22, 307ff, 528, 537ff, 601, 992, 1062ff, 1135ff). It is not just the sights that nature offers, but also scents, sounds and other sensory objects that prompt the monks’ delight in the beauty of nature.

It is reasonable to ask whether the expressions of ‘delight’, ‘joy’, and ‘enjoyment’, which are often ecstatic in character, represent a one-off exception to the usual Buddhist view – reserved and often suspicious – of beauty. Perhaps, instead, they challenge a familiar conception of what this usual view is. Perhaps the text ‘believes [and

corrects] the common Western portrayal of the arhat as apathetic, cool and aloof' (Buswell & Lopez, 2014, p.904). In correcting this portrayal, the text would therefore be demonstrating a more positive Buddhist attitude towards sensory beauty than most commentators allow.

My discussion in this paper will, I hope, contribute something to this debate. I want to argue that the Theragāthā verses on natural beauty are important in two regards. First, they contribute to aesthetics, specifically to the theory of beauty. In this regard, the text is significant outside the confines of Buddhist scholarship. Second, the verses contribute to forming a coherent Buddhist perspective on beauty and its place in human life. One particular aspect of this contribution is to help understand the idea of - and the motivation for speaking of - 'inner' beauty. In a coherent Buddhist perspective, I suggest, beauty will not have the paramount importance that hyperbolic claims like Mascaró's (see above) attribute to it. It will, nevertheless, have a significant place in the Buddhist dispensation.

My remarks on the relevant Theragāthā verses fall under two headings: 'Natural beauty and refuge' and 'Natural beauty and meditation'.

3. Natural Beauty and Refuge

Nyanaponika Thera wrote that someone who sees clearly 'the hard and cruel face of the world' sees too that there is 'a need for taking refuge' from this 'world of ... danger and misery', from that 'vast ocean of suffering' that is the ordinary human condition (1994, p. 232). The darkly pessimistic estimate of the human world that Nyanaponika articulates accurately reflects, in my judgement, the Buddha's own view of our ordinary condition (Cooper, 2021 & 2024). If the estimate is

right, then it is natural for people to seek refuge from the human world. Nyanaponika has in mind, of course, ‘the triple refuge’ of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. But it would be reasonable for anyone who shares his estimate to look for other refuges as well – for respite, even if temporary, from the suffering, danger, cruelty and misery that characterise the human world.

It is clear from several verses in the *Theragāthā* that the monks who composed them sought and found refuge in natural environments, away from the human world of ambition, greed, cruelty, busyness, jealousies and the like. More than one monk registers ‘disgust with the world’ (v. 269), and several of them find a remedy for this in escape into nature – somewhere ‘not filled with householders’. ‘One should avoid people’, and spend time among animals, birds and rocks (vv. 1069, 1072). ‘Let us go from here!’, declares a monk, from the village to the forest, where there are not the ‘attachments’ that beset ordinary life in the world (v. 14). ‘Forest lodgings, secluded, with little noise, [are] fit’ for a monk who has developed ‘discontent with the world’ (vv. 592, 594).

Remarks like these have their parallels in other texts. In the *Udāna* (2.10), for example, a monk tells the Buddha how, as a householder, he ‘lived fearful and agitated’, but that now he is ‘alone in the forest’ he is ‘fearless ... confident ... with a mind like a deer’. Later in the same text (4.50), the Buddha himself recounts how, in the forest, he is no longer ‘in discomfort and not at ease’. He meets an elephant who shares his sentiments. ‘Each of us’, the Buddha, notes, ‘delights in being alone in the forest’.

What distinguishes the Theragāthā verses from other testimonies to nature as refuge is an emphasis on the beauty of the places and creatures encountered in nature. In v. 1069, for instance, it is not just the absence of people, but delight in the beauty of deer, rocks and birds that makes the place a refuge from the human world. In vv. 537 ff, it is not just being alone, away from other people, that the monk enjoys, for the flowers, woods and mountains delight him. Enjoyment of natural beauty is part of ‘the happiness of release’ that he experiences.

There are two respects in which its beauty is relevant to nature’s being a refuge from the human world. First, its beauty makes a natural environment an attractive place in which to find refuge. A refuge, after all, must in certain ways be better than the place from which one is seeking to escape. How else could it serve as a welcome refuge? Its beauty may not be the only quality one hopes to find in a place of refuge, but it is surely one of them.

Second, ‘the experience of nature in its essential beauty’, as one author puts it, is ‘undisrupted by greed and possession’ (Euron 2017, 316). The point indicated here is best explained by considering some remarks of Immanuel Kant. For Kant, famously, genuine appreciation of beauty is ‘disinterested’. The pleasure we take in it is not due to preexisting desires or needs, nor to the satisfaction of any practical aims and goals. Kant holds that it is easier in the case of natural beauty than that of artistic beauty to exercise this disinterested appreciation. Enjoyment of art, he holds, is too often infected by ‘vanity’, prejudices and social aspirations. By contrast, aesthetic appreciation of nature is generally free from such defects. Indeed, to enjoy natural beauty is a

mark of a ‘beautiful soul’ (1954, p. 159), for it is an enjoyment unsullied by all-too-human failings, including ‘greed and possession’.

Disinterested delight in nature’s beauty, therefore, at once contributes to and reflects a degree of liberation from the human world from which one seeks refuge. The person capable of such delight is free from the failings that typically contaminate the enjoyment of things in the human world. The delight in natural beauty is, in effect, a mark of success in finding such a refuge from that world.

The Kantian thought that, if I am right, is also expressed by monks in the Theragāthā, is an important one in the theory of natural beauty. A central question to be addressed by any such theory is why natural beauty matters a great deal to so many people. It is clear from the testimony of countless poets – as indeed it is from the words of the monks – that natural beauty is not simply something pleasant to experience, but something integral to the lives they want to lead, something whose loss would be a very serious thing. The Kantian thought offers a partial answer to the question. The ability disinterestedly to experience natural beauty is a signal of a person’s emancipation from the human world and the failings and vices in which it is mired. Put in a more Buddhist idiom, it is a sign of a degree of liberation from attachment, hence of being on the path to enlightenment.

As this suggests, the Kantian thought is not only a contribution to a theory of beauty, but to understanding the place and significance of beauty in early Buddhist teaching. Disinterested appreciation of natural beauty is a component in the process or path of liberation. (Whether or

not ‘disinterested’ is an appropriate and felicitous term to apply to the kind of appreciation Kant has in mind is a question I won’t go into here.)

Some light is also cast on why it might be appropriate to speak of the moral, spiritual qualities of a person as a form of ‘inner’ beauty. Recall, here, Kant’s idea of ‘the beautiful soul’. What makes his soul beautiful is the person’s capacity for disinterested appreciation of natural beauty, unhampered by vanity, aspirations and prejudices. Kant, that is, makes a connection between the ‘outer’ beauty of nature and the ‘inner’ beauty of a person with a ‘beautiful soul’. A similar connection is there for the Buddhist to make. The ‘inner’ beauty of the monk owes, at least in part, to his delight in natural beauty.

4. Natural Beauty and Meditation

I now turn to a second important aspect of the experience of natural beauty attested to in the Theragāthā. Several of its verses speak of the way in which being in natural environments is conducive to meditation or contemplation (*samādhi*). So, of course, do passages in other texts, such as the Samyutta Nikāya (I.1.10) where ‘those who dwell deep in the forest’ are ‘leading the holy life’, entirely serene. What is distinctive in the Elders’ verses is an emphasis on natural beauty as conducive to meditation. It is not simply the peace, tranquillity and absence of people that provides a context for meditation. For one monk, it is the beautiful peacock that ‘awakens’ him to meditation (v. 22); for a second, it is again the beauty of birds, as well as that of thunder, that delights him as he meditates (v. 1136); for a third monk, it is flowers and woodland plants that inspires meditation (v. 523).

This raises the question of why and how the experience of beauty should invite meditation. The answer, surely, has to do with the

pleasure or happiness that belongs to the experience of natural beauty. As the monk, Bhūta, explains, it is the surrounding beauty that gives him the ‘contentment’ for him happily to meditate (v. 523). That there is a connection between happiness and meditation is an idea familiar in several texts – for example, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (X.3), it is said that ‘when there is pleasure ... right concentration has its proximate cause’.

There are, however, well-known views of aesthetic experience that would make it hard to understand a connection between pleasure or happiness and meditation. On one view, for example, aesthetic appreciation is simply a matter of enjoying pleasant sensations when perceiving a beautiful object. This would leave entirely opaque any relation between the experience of beauty and meditation. It is not sufficient to say that beauty ‘causes’ a ‘spiritual attitude’ (Euron, 2017, p. 317). For we want to know how a spiritual or meditative attitude arises through the experience of beauty.

Let’s turn for help, once more, to Kant. In natural beauty, he writes, a person ‘may find ... a feast for the soul in a train of thought’, and a connection with ‘the contemplation of nature’. Natural beauty provides not only enjoyable ‘sensations’, but also ‘a feeling of reflection’. It is as if nature ‘speaks to us’ and communicates ‘a higher meaning’ (1952, pp. 157 - 159). For Kant, fully to experience natural beauty is already to be drawn to reflection or contemplation. For example, the sight of a beautiful and purely white flower ‘dispose[s] the mind to ideas of innocence’.

I suggest that a view not unlike Kant’s is expressed in verses of the Theragāthā. The beauty of the peacock serves to ‘awaken’ a monk to meditation (v. 22); another monk, delighted by the peacock’s beauty,

at the same time meditates on this delight (v. 212). Sensory pleasure in the sights and sounds of nature, far from interfering with or distracting from meditation, are, so to speak, fused with it. The beautiful birds and ‘the beautiful-sounding thunder, will delight you as you meditate in the wood’ (v. 1136). ‘This mind of mine’, declares another monk, ‘does not waver’ amidst the ‘chirping and cries of the birds’ (v. 49).

The suggestion is not that the monks’ meditations are the same in purpose and content as the ‘trains of thought’ that Kant has in mind. The similarity, rather, is in the general idea that experience of natural beauty has a cognitive dimension: it is a kind of experience that cannot but draw one to reflect or contemplate. The thought, inspired by reflection on ‘grass and wood’, that this world ‘is not mine’, is a distinctively Buddhist thought (v. 717). So perhaps is the analogy, that strikes one monk, between a beautiful but scentless flower and the ‘well-spoken but fruitless words of one who does not act’ (v. 323).

The kinds of meditation to which the experience of natural beauty disposes of people will vary from culture to culture, religion to religion, philosophy to philosophy. The important thing is to recognise that it is an experience that does have this power. It is important, as a contribution to aesthetics, because it helps to explain – as did the idea of beauty as refuge – why natural beauty matters so much to many people. This is difficult to explain, as we saw, if the enjoyment of beauty is treated as simply a pleasure taken in sensory phenomena. Once it is recognised, however, that this enjoyment is ‘a feast for the soul’ – one that cannot but incline to reflection on nature, the world and ourselves – a reason why experience of natural beauty is of significance for us becomes apparent.

My interpretation of the Elders' verses also helps in understanding the idea of 'inner' beauty in Buddhism. Recall Kant's notion of 'the beautiful soul'. The point made in the previous section was that a soul or a person is made beautiful in part because of a capacity for 'disinterested' appreciation of natural beauty – an appreciation innocent of the prejudices, vanities and other failings that pervade our dealings in the human world. Here is one motive for talking of 'inner' beauty.

And another motive has emerged in the present section. In experiencing natural beauty, we exercise a capacity for freely engaged reflection or contemplation, inspired by the delight such experience gives. But to exercise this capacity – to meditate on the world, on meaning, on ourselves – is itself a mark of a 'beautiful soul', of 'inner' beauty. As the American philosopher, Nick Riggle puts it, there is beauty in someone who is 'animated by beauty', just as there is compassion in a person moved by compassion. In authentically engaging with beauty 'you are adding to it your own beauty' (2022, p. 148 & pp.169-70).

Here, then, is a further justification for employing the language of beauty to describe the 'inner', moral character of a person, for a link is made between 'inner' and 'external' beauty. No doubt there are further reasons. For example, it is often said in texts, such as *The Buddhacarita*, that the physical beauty of the Buddha is an expression or manifestation of his wisdom and moral purity. It is not unnatural to then describe this wisdom and purity as a form of ('inner') beauty: it is a kind of beauty because it manifests itself in the physical, external beauty of the Buddha's face, figure and gestures. (Cooper, 2017 and

Kidd, 2017). But further consideration of this point would take us beyond the confines of the present paper.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the importance attached to natural beauty in the Theragāthā is due to two considerations. First, its beauty is seen as a significant reason why nature serves as a place of refuge from a human world all too liable to cause ‘disgust’. Second, partly through the pleasure and delight that natural beauty gives, nature invites and encourages meditation.

Each of these considerations makes an important contribution to aesthetics and the theory of beauty. This is because they help to answer the question of why natural beauty is not merely pleasant to experience, but why it is something that deeply matters to large numbers of people. Nature at once provides refuge and a ‘feast for the soul’, not least because of its beauty.

Each consideration also contributes to an understanding of the place of beauty in Buddhist teaching. ‘Disinterested’ appreciation of natural beauty is a mark of a detachment or emancipation from the human world to which a monk should aspire. Moreover, a mind ‘animated’ by natural beauty is disposed to the reflective and meditative practices in which a person who seeks enlightenment should engage. Finally, both considerations help to legitimate Buddhist talk of ‘inner’ or moral beauty. This is because each of them makes an intelligible link between ‘inner’ and physical or external beauty.

Beauty may not have the paramount place in Buddhist teaching ascribed to it in the hyperbolic statements, like Mascaró’s, cited at the

beginning. But the verses of the Elders also demonstrate that beauty has a more positive role than many commentators suggest. ‘The Buddhist does not avoid beauty’, writes one commentator, in reply to some of the hostile comments on beauty to be found in the canonical texts (Dhirasekera n.d., 10). To this it should be added that, in the spirit of the monks who composed the *Theragāthā*, the Buddhist should positively welcome and embrace natural beauty.

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