

Colour and beauty in the Buddha's teaching

“Puna ca param bhikkhave Tathāgatassa arahato sammā-sambuddhassa pubb’eva sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhi-sattass’eva sato cattāro sakuṇā nānā-vaṇṇā catūhi disāhi āgantvā pāda-mūle nipatitvā sabba-setā sampajjiṃsu... Yam-pi bhikkhave Tathāgatassa arahato sammā-sambuddhassa pubb’eva sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhi-sattass’eva sato cattāro sakuṇā nānā-vaṇṇā catūhi disāhi āgantvā pāda-mūle nipatitvā sabba-setā sampajjiṃsu, cattāro’me bhikkave vaṇṇā khattiyā brāhmaṇā vessā suddā, te Tathāgata-p-pavedite Dhamma-vinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā anuttaraṃ vimuttiṃ sacchikaronti. Tassa abhisambodhāya ayaṃ catuttho mahā-supino pātur-ahosi.”

“And further, bhikkhus, before the Tathāgata became fully enlightened, an arahant – while still an unenlightened bodhisatta – four birds of various colours came to him from the four directions, and having alighted at his feet, they turned pure white... now, bhikkhus, before the Tathāgata became fully enlightened, an arahant – while still an unenlightened bodhisatta – four birds of various colours came to him from the four directions, and having alighted at his feet, turned pure white: there are four castes – warrior nobles, brahmins, merchants, and labourers; having gone forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma-Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathāgata, they will realise for themselves unsurpassed release. This is the meaning of the fourth great dream about my enlightenment.”

A.V.196

This was not a dream in the sense of a wish or a desire. This was a dream in the usual sense, but a strange and beautiful dream, portending great things for the bodhisatta. It is a good place to start an examination of *vaṇṇa*. *Vaṇṇa* is a pāli term with a broad range of meaning and nuance: the PTS dictionary gives these basic meanings – **vaṇṇa**: 1. colour, 2. appearance, 3. lustre, splendour, 4. beauty, 5. expression, look, 6. colour of skin, appearance of body, complexion, 7. kind, sort, 8. timbre, 9. constitution, likeness, property. In the dream of the bodhisatta, the birds of *various colours* (*nānā-vaṇṇā* [1]) symbolised the people of *various castes* (*nānā-vaṇṇā* [6]).

Partly based on this dream, the Buddha de-emphasised the social boundaries of his time after awakening. He often referred to members of all four castes simply as “*gahapatikā*” (householders) and talked about another group, *samaṇā* – the recluses. These were the “pure white” caste as suggested by the dream.

The symbolism is beautiful: pure white is a colour which does not display any hue, but which is composed of all hues. The disciples of the Buddha, gone forth from every background and social status, come to a shared purity of knowledge and liberation in his Dhamma, having let go of all worldly notions of identity.

The sense of *vaṇṇa* as caste underlays a great number of teachings in the suttas. The Buddha frequently had to correct the racial views of the brahmins in order to give them a truer understanding of human dignity and worth. Other senses of *vaṇṇa*, particularly colour, appearance and beauty, are also very important to any person who wishes for a true understanding of things.

Although most of the Buddha's teachings on the removal of ignorance focus on the perspectives of the *pañca-khandhā*, the *saḷāyatanā*, and *paṭicca-samuppāda*, there are a number of teachings that deal with issues of colour and beauty directly. These teachings, rarely commented on and probably unfamiliar to most, form a fascinating web that can lead all the way to freedom.

FOUR COLOURS

The lotus is well-known as one of the symbols in Buddhist iconography. The Buddha himself frequently used lotuses as similes in his teachings. Four kinds of lotus are mentioned in the suttas: *uppala*, *kumuda*, *paduma*, and *puṇḍarīka*. These translate as the *blue* lotus, the *yellow* lotus, the *red* lotus, and the *white* lotus. Interestingly, these four colours – in pāli: *nīla*, *pīta*, *lohita* and *odāta* – occur as a significant group in many places in the Buddha's teachings.

There is a curious episode in the *Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta*. When a group of young Licchavis, dressed in a slightly surreal manner, approach the Buddha, he draws particular attention to them:

“*Tatr’ekacce Licchavī nīlā honti nīla-vaṇṇā nīla-vatthā nīlālaṅkāra, ekacce Licchavī pītā honti pīta-vaṇṇā pīta-vatthā pītālaṅkāra, ekacce Licchavī lohita honti lohita-vaṇṇā lohita-vatthā lohita-laṅkāra, ekacce Licchavī odātā honti odāta-vaṇṇā odāta-vatthā odātālaṅkāra... Addasā kho Bhagavā te Licchavī dūrato va āgacchante, disvā bhikkhū āmantesi: ‘Yesam bhikkhave bhikkhūnam devā Tāvatisā aditthā, oloketha bhikkhave Licchavi-parisaṃ, avaloketha bhikkhave Licchavi-parisaṃ, upasaṃharatha bhikkhave Licchavi-parisaṃ Tāvatisa-parisa-ti.’”*

“Some of the Licchavis were all blue, blue in colour, with blue clothing and blue adornment; some of the Licchavis were all yellow, yellow in colour, with yellow clothing and yellow adornment; some of the Licchavis were all red, red in colour, with red clothing and red adornment; some of the Licchavis were all white, white in colour, with white clothing and white adornment... The Blessed One saw the Licchavis coming in the distance, and having seen them, he announced to the bhikkhus: ‘Whatever bhikkhus have not seen the Tāvatisa devas, take a look at this assembly of Licchavis, really, take a look at this assembly of Licchavis – this assembly of Licchavis looks just like an assembly of the Tāvatisa devas!’” **D.16**

It seems appropriate that the Buddha likens them to a celestial assembly. In the *Mahā-Samaya Sutta* (D.20), many heavenly assemblies of devas, gandhabbas, kumbhaṇḍas, nāgas, and yakkhas are described as appearing in vivid, various hues like this. There is something about these four colours, the four primary colours, that naturally appeals to the mind – pure, beautiful, surreal and peaceful. But what exactly is ‘primary’ about a primary colour?

The answer may lie in the notion of *kasiṇa*: the Buddha taught these four colours as meditation subjects in themselves.

KASIṆA

“*Puna ca param, Udayi, akkhātā mayā sāvakanāṃ paṭipadā, yathā paṭipannā me sāvakā dasa kasiṇ’āyatanāni bhāventi... nīla-kasiṇaṃ eko sañjānāti uddham adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇaṃ, pīta-kasiṇaṃ eko sañjānāti uddham adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇaṃ, lohita-kasiṇaṃ eko sañjānāti uddham adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇaṃ, odāta-kasiṇaṃ eko sañjānāti uddham adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇaṃ... Tatra ca pana me sāvakā bahū abhiññā-vosāna-pārami-pattā viharanti.’”*

“Further, Udayi, I have proclaimed the way of practise to my disciples, and in that way my disciples develop the ten *kasiṇa* faculties... one is aware only of *kasiṇa* blue above, below and around – non-dual, immeasurable; one is aware only of *kasiṇa* yellow above, below and around – non-dual, immeasurable; one is aware only of *kasiṇa* red above, below and around – non-dual, immeasurable; one is aware only of *kasiṇa* white above, below and around – non-dual, immeasurable... And through that many of my disciples dwell in the perfection and consumation of direct knowledge.” **M.77**

The word *kasiṇa* above has been left deliberately untranslated. The PTS dictionary offers this as a definition – ***kasiṇa***: 1. entire, whole, 2. one of the aids to *kammaṭṭhāna* by means of which *jhāna* may be attained. Venerable Ñāṇamoli used the term ‘universal’ in the glossary to his translation of the *Visuddhi-magga*. Most texts leave *kasiṇa* untranslated because it is difficult to understand and even harder to convey in english.

The nature of *kasiṇa* meditation and the subjects of *kasiṇa* meditation (earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, space, and consciousness) suggests the possibility that these ‘entireties’ or ‘totalities’ are something natural to the mind, and in which it can unify. To put it in different terms, what makes a *kasiṇa* universal is the possibility that it exists *a priori* in the mind – a ‘sense’ or ‘faculty’ that is part of our cognitive structure, an abstract purity used to interpret and categorise the world.

The Buddha gave a teaching involving these four colours that seems to substantiate this – the *abhibh’āyatanāni*: the eight masteries of the faculties (*abhibhū* + *āyatana*= master, overlord + faculty, sphere).

“*Evam-evam ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati nīlāni nīla-vaṇṇāni nīla-dassanāni nīla-bhāsāni. Taṃ abhibhuyya: Jānāmi passāmī-ti evaṃ saññī hoti; idaṃ pañcamāṃ abhibh’āyatanāṃ... Evam-evam ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati pītāni pīta-vaṇṇāni pīta-dassanāni pīta-bhāsāni. Taṃ abhibhuyya: Jānāmi passāmī-ti evaṃ saññī hoti; idaṃ chaṭṭhāṃ abhibh’āyatanāṃ... Evam-evam ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati lohitaṃ lohita-vaṇṇāni lohita-dassanāni lohita-bhāsāni. Taṃ abhibhuyya: Jānāmi passāmī-ti evaṃ saññī hoti; idaṃ sattamaṃ abhibh’āyatanāṃ... Evam-evam ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati odātāni odāta-vaṇṇāni odāta-dassanāni odāta-bhāsāni. Taṃ abhibhuyya: Jānāmi passāmī-ti evaṃ saññī hoti; idaṃ aṭṭhamāṃ abhibh’āyatanāṃ.*”

“Thus not percipient of form internally, one sees blue forms externally, blue in colour, blue in appearance, luminous blue. Mastering that, one is percipient thus: ‘I know, I see.’ This is the fifth mastery of the faculties... Thus not percipient of form internally, one sees yellow forms externally, yellow in colour, yellow in appearance, luminous yellow. Mastering that, one is percipient thus: ‘I know, I see.’ This is the sixth mastery of the faculties... Thus not percipient of form internally, one sees red forms externally, red in colour, red in appearance, luminous red. Mastering that, one is percipient thus: ‘I know, I see.’ This is the seventh mastery of the faculties... Thus not percipient of form internally, one sees white forms externally, white in colour, white in appearance, luminous white. Mastering that, one is percipient thus: ‘I know, I see.’ This is the eighth mastery of the faculties.”

M.77

The description of *kasiṇa* meditation in the *Visuddhi-magga* makes the connection more explicit. It describes the results and benefits of developing the meditation on each colour *kasiṇa*.

Blue: “The blue *kasiṇa* is the basis for such powers as creating black forms, causing darkness, acquisition of mastery of the faculties by the method of fairness and ugliness, and attainment of the beautiful liberation”.

Yellow: “The yellow *kasiṇa* is the basis for such powers as creating yellow forms, resolving that something shall be gold, acquisition of mastery of the faculties in the way stated, and attainment of the beautiful liberation”.

Red: “The red *kasiṇa* is the basis for such powers as creating red forms, acquisition of mastery of the faculties in the way stated, and attainment of the beautiful liberation”.

White: “The white *kasiṇa* is the basis for such powers as creating white forms, banishing stiffness and torpor, dispelling darkness, causing light for the purpose of seeing visible objects with the divine eye”.

The inference here is that these colours somehow exist in the mind prior to any forms, and with training, the mind can apply that sense or faculty of each colour on to forms, which are secondary.

RELATED THEMES

As stated above, the consumation of meditating on the colour *kasiṇā* is the beautiful liberation, or *subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ*. There is only one other group of meditation themes that lead to the beautiful liberation – the four *brahma-vihārā: mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā*.

In the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta (D.30)*, the Buddha explains the thirty-two marks of a great man that he possesses, and he also notes that each one is the *kamma-vipāka* of great development in a particular area. Regarding the marks of a great man with an eye for colour, there seems to be some justification for matching the four primary colours with the four divine abidings in the orders that he taught them: four purities of perception and four purities of inclination.

METTĀ – ‘true-blue’ friendship? (empathy with beings)

“*Yam-pi bhikkhave Tathāgato purimaṃ jātīm purimaṃ bhavaṃ purimaṃ niketaṃ pubbe manussa-bhūto samāno na visataṃ na ca visācitaṃ na pana viceyya-pekkihā uju tathā pasataṃ udu-mano piya-cakkhunā bahu-janaṃ udikkhitā ahoṣi, so tassa kammaṃ katattā upacitattā ussannattā vipulattā kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā sugatīm saggaṃ upajjati... So tato cuto itthattaṃ āgato samāno imāni dve mahā-purisa-lakkhaṇāni paṭilabhāti, abhi-nīla-netto ca hoti go-pakkhūmo ca.*”

“Bhikkhus, in whatever former birth, whatever former existence, whatever former abode, the Tathāgata was accustomed to look at people not askance, obliquely, or furtively, but directly, openly and straightforwardly, with kindly eyes – as a result of that kamma, on the break-up of the body at death, he went to a good destination, he arose in a heavenly world... and now returning to this human state, he has acquired two marks of a Great Man, *piercing blue eyes* and *eyelashes like a cow*.”

D.30

KARUṆĀ – ‘golden’ compassion? (empathy with suffering)

“*Yam-pi bhikkhave Tathāgato purimaṃ jātiṃ purimaṃ bhavaṃ purimaṃ nikaṃ pubbe manussa-bhūto samāno akkodhano ahosi anupāyāsa-bahulo, bahum-pi vutto samāno nābhisajji na kuppi na vyāpajji na paṭiṭṭhayaṃ, na kopaṇ-ca dosaṇ-ca appaccayaṇ-ca patvā’kāsi, dātā ca ahosi sukhumānaṃ mudukānaṃ attharaṇānaṃ pāpuraṇānaṃ khoma-sukhumānaṃ kappāsika-sukhumānaṃ koseyya-sukhumānaṃ kambala-sukhumānaṃ, so tassa kammaṃ katattā upacitattā ussannattā vipulattā kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā sugatiṃ saggaṃ upajjati... So tato cuto itthattaṃ āgato samāno imaṃ mahā-purisa-lakkhaṇaṃ paṭilabhati, suvaṇṇa-vaṇṇo hoti kañcana-sannibha-t-taco hoti.*”

“Bhikkhus, in whatever former birth, whatever former existence, whatever former abode, the Tathāgata lived without anger, perfectly unruffled, and even after many words had been uttered was not abusive, nor agitated, nor ill-disposed, nor aggressive, displaying neither anger nor hatred nor resentment, but was in the habit of giving fine, soft rugs, cloaks, fine linen, fine cotton, silk and woollen stuffs – as a result of that kamma, on the break-up of the body at death, he went to a good destination, he arose in a heavenly world... and now returning to this human state, he has acquired this mark of a Great Man, a radiant complexion with *skin the colour of gold.*” **D.30**

MUDITĀ – ‘bleeding heart’ liberality? (empathy with ways and means)

There are no marks of a great man that are red, but an interesting comparison may come from the modern world. Socialism, and especially communism, with its motto of “*from each according to his ability, to each according to his need*” seems to come closest to the spirit of *muditā*, which is the sense of open-heartedness that is content enough to give each person his or her place on earth, no matter how high or low. Of course, these political practices take the colour red as symbolic of their ideas.

UPEKKHĀ – an ‘uncoloured’ perspective? (empathy with truth)

“*Yam-pi bhikkhave Tathāgato purimaṃ jātiṃ purimaṃ bhavaṃ purimaṃ nikaṃ pubbe manussa-bhūto samāno musā-vādaṃ pahāya musā-vādā paṭivirato ahosi sacca-vādī sacca-sangho theto paccayiko avisaṃvādaṃ lokassa, so tassa kammaṃ katattā upacitattā ussannattā vipulattā kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā sugatiṃ saggaṃ upajjati... So tato cuto itthattaṃ āgato samāno imāni dve mahā-purisa-lakkhaṇāni paṭilabhati, ek’eka lomo ca hoti uṇṇā ca bhamuk’antare jātā hoti odātā mudutula-sannibhā.*”

“Bhikkhus, in whatever former birth, whatever former existence, whatever former abode, the Tathāgata, rejecting false speech, put away lies and became a truth-speaker, wedded to the truth, reliable, consistent, not deceiving the world – as a result of that kamma, on the break-up of the body at death, he went to a good destination, he arose in a heavenly world... and now returning to this human state, he has acquired two marks of a Great Man, his body hairs are separate, one to each pore, and *the hair between his brows is white* and soft like cotton-down.” **D.30**

THE BEAUTIFUL

As meditation themes, the primary colours and the divine abidings lead to the beautiful liberation, the *subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ*. *Subha* is the most common pāli word for beautiful. The PTS dictionary defines it as follows – **subha**: 1. shining, bright, beautiful, auspicious, lucky, pleasant. What was the *Buddha*’s perspective on beauty? He commented on this a few times in his teachings, and his remarks are as emphatic as they are polarised.

“*Subhan-t’eva adhimutto hoti; ayaṃ vimokkho tatiyo.*”

“One is intent only upon the beautiful; this is the third liberation.”

D.15

“*Evaṃ-vādī kho maṃ Bhaggava evaṃ akkhāyimi eke samaṇa-brāhmaṇa asatā tucchā musā abhūtena abbhācikkhanti: ‘Viparīto samaṇo Gotamo bhikkhavo ca. Samaṇo Gotamo evaṃ-āha: – Yasmiṃ samaye subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ upasampajja viharati, sabbaṃ tasmim samaye asubhan-t’eva sañjānāti-ti.’ Na kho panāhaṃ Bhaggava evaṃ vadāmi: ‘Yasmiṃ samaye subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ upasampajja viharati, sabbaṃ tasmim samaye asubhan-t’eva sañjānāti-ti.’ Evaṇ-ca kho ahaṃ vadāmi: ‘Yasmiṃ samaye subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ upasampajja viharati, subhan-t’eva tasmim samaye sañjānāti-ti.’*”

“And I, Bhaggava, who teach this and declare this, am wrongly, vainly, lyingly, and falsely accused by some recluses and brahmins who say: ‘The recluse Gotama and his monks are on the wrong track. This is what

the samaṇa Gotama teaches: ‘When one dwells having attained to the beautiful liberation, at that time he knows everything as un-beautiful.’ But I say thus: ‘When one dwells having attained to the beautiful liberation, at that time he knows it is beautiful.’” **D.22**

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“*Atthi bhikkhave subha-nimittam tattha ayoṇiso-manasikāra bahulī-kāro ayam-āhāro anuppannassa vā kāma-c-chandassa uppādāya uppannassa vā kāma-c-chandassa bhiyyo-bhāvāya vepullāya.*”

There is, bhikkhus, the theme of the beautiful; to frequently pay unwise attention right there – this is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and for the increase and growth of sensual desire once it has arisen.” **S.XLVI.2**

“*Asubhe bhikkhave subhan-ti saññā-vipallāso citta-vipallāso diṭṭhi-vipallāso... asubhe subha-saññino, micchā-diṭṭhi-gatā sattā khitta-cittā visaññino; te yoga-yuttā mārassa ayoga-k-khemino janā.*”

“Bhikkhus, to perceive ‘beautiful’ in the un-beautiful is a perversion of perception, a perversion of the heart, a perversion of view... perceiving the beautiful in the un-beautiful, beings resort to wrong views – perceiving illusions, they are deranged in heart, ensnared by Māra, not free from bonds; they are far from security.” **A.IV.49**

We can understand from these examples that there is a right and a wrong way to understand beauty. Assuming that the beautiful liberation is based on the beautiful in its true sense, the development of the way to the beautiful liberation may suggest something about the nature of true beauty.

“*Mettā saha-gatena cetasā ekaṃ disaṃ pharitvā viharati, tathā dutiyaṃ tathā tatiyaṃ tathā catutthaṃ, iti uddham-adho tiriyaṃ sabbadhi sabbattatāya sabbā vantaṃ lokam, mettā saha-gatena cetasā vipulena mahaggatena appamāṇena averena abyapajjhena pharitvā viharati.*”

“He abides with his heart imbued with loving-kindness extending over one quarter, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, likewise the fourth quarter, and so above, below, around, and everywhere and to all as to himself; he abides with his heart abundant, exalted, measureless in loving-kindness, without hostility or ill-will, extending over the all-encompassing world.” **M.99**

“*Ñīla-kasiṇam eko sañjānāti uddham adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇam.*”

“One is aware only of *kasiṇa* blue above, below and around – non-dual, immeasurable.” **M.77**

These are the basic descriptions of developing the *brahmā-vihārā* and the *kasiṇā*, respectively. The similarities are striking: both have the awareness of a single pure theme of perception or inclination, extending that above, below, and in all directions until it is immeasurable. Obviously no room remains for the particular characteristics of phenomena (Cf. **M.99**), and in the development of *kasiṇa* meditation, there is perhaps the only reference in the suttas to ‘non-duality’. The consequence here is that beauty is a quality of the mind itself, when it is united in these themes, with no reference to anything else. The Buddha suggests as much in the reference to **D.22** above; when he is criticised over the nature of his teaching on the beautiful liberation, his response is to remove the reference to anything ‘other’ and to reassert that the beautiful liberation has only the beautiful as its theme.

So perhaps in the truest sense there is no ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ beauty, but only one beauty – that of the mind. To paraphrase the old maxim, “*Beauty is in the (mind’s) eye of the beholder.*” It is only by turning the mind back on its own pure perception or inclination, in limitless non-duality, do we really begin to know beauty.

More support, through inference, comes from comparing the four *saññā-vipallāsā*, perversions of perception, with the three *lakṣhaṇā*, the universal characteristics. We can see that the first three of the *saññā-vipallāsā* (*nicca-saññā*, *sukha-saññā*, *atta-saññā*) have an equal and opposite correspondence with the three *lakṣhaṇā* (*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*). The first *vipallāsa*, *nicca-saññā* – the perception of reliability in things, is perverse because of the universal characteristic of *anicca* – all conditions are unreliable. The second *vipallāsa*, *sukha-saññā* – the perception of ease in things, is perverse because of the universal characteristic of *dukkha* – all conditions are oppressive to some degree. The third *vipallāsa*, *atta-saññā* – the perception of self in things, is perverse because of the universal characteristic of *anattā* – all things

are not self. The fourth *vipallāsa*, *subha-saññā* – the perception of beauty in things, is said to be perverse, but it has no universal characteristic in support of this. If seeing things as beautiful is a perversion of perception, why isn't 'non-beautiful' one of the characteristics? What is the significance of this?

The answer seems to be that perversions of perception extend only as far as the range of perception (subject-and-object mode – 'duality'), while the universal characteristics hold true both for perception – 'duality', and for states in themselves (e.g. unified states of mind – 'non-duality'). Two consequences follow from this. One is that there must be states of 'non-duality' of mind that actually *are* beautiful – since the truth of 'un-beautiful' is restricted only to perception, and is not a universal characteristic. This supports the notion that true beauty is found in a unified mind. The second consequence is that even when one has entered into 'non-duality', popularly considered a spiritual consummation in itself, only one problem has been removed and three still remain – that state is still *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*.

This dichotomy between true beauty at the level of the mind, and true non-beauty at the level of phenomena, poses an interesting question: is practising *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna* compatible with *subhan-t'eva adhimutto hoti*? In english, is meditation on the non-beautiful compatible with being resolved only upon the beautiful? To answer that is to begin to address the problem of the three characteristics.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE NON-BEAUTIFUL: INSIGHTFUL FRIENDS

It seems a paradox, but contemplation of the un-beautiful (at the level of things which actually are un-beautiful) is no obstacle, and indeed a natural complement, to the inclination towards the beautiful, and ultimately, to real understanding. The Buddha goes so far as to say:

“Yāyaṃ bhikkhu subha-dhātu ayaṃ dhātu asubhaṃ paṭicca paññāyati.”

“The beautiful element is discerned in dependence on the un-beautiful.”

S.XIV.11

This story comes from the commentary to the Sutta Nipāta:

Once the Blessed One lived near Sāvattihī at the Jeta Grove in Anathapiṇḍika's monastery. At that time the venerable Sāriputta had as his personal attendant a young monk who had been ordained under him and was a goldsmith's son. The venerable Sāriputta thought: “For young people, the contemplation of the body's impurity is a suitable subject of meditation,” and for conquering lust he instructed him in that meditation.

But the young monk's mind could not even get to the stage of becoming familiar with the subject, and he said so to the venerable Sāriputta: “This is of no help to me.” But the therā thought: “For young people this is surely suitable,” and he gave him again the very same subject of meditation. But even after four months of effort the monk did not obtain even the smallest result. Thereupon the therā took him to the Blessed One, and the Master said: “To know what is suitable to him is not within range of your capacities, Sāriputta. He is one who has to be guided by a Buddha.”

And the Blessed One, by his supernormal power, created a red lotus of radiant colour, and placed it into the hands of the monk, saying: “Well, O monk, at a shady spot of the monastery plant this lotus in sandy soil. Then, facing it, sit down with legs crossed and think, ‘Red, red’.”

That monk, namely, had been born in a goldsmith's family throughout five hundred lives. Hence the Blessed One knew: “A red object will be suitable to him.”

The monk did as he was told, and almost immediately he attained, in succession, to all four jhānas, those sublime states of full meditative absorption, and he even was able to enter into them in their reverse as well as their normal order.

Now the Master resolved in his mind: “May the lotus wither!” When the monk emerged from his meditation, he saw the red lotus withered and discoloured, and he thought: “This radiant form has now been crushed by decay!” Obtaining from that a vivid perception of impermanence, he then applied it to himself, and continuing his contemplation, he understood: “What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is not self,” and he saw the three planes of existence as if enveloped in flames.

Not far from him there was a lotus pond. Boys had gone into it, gathering flowers and had put them on a heap at the shore. When the monk looked at the scene, the red lotus blossoms which were still in the water

appeared to him like tongues of flames in a burning reed thicket; and the falling petals seemed to plunge into a chasm. And among the flowers that were lying on the land, those on top that were withered appeared to him as if seared by fire. Stirred by that sight he contemplated on life's processes, and still more the three planes of existence appeared to him like a house enveloped in flames that does not give any refuge and safety.

Then the Blessed One, sitting in his room, emitted his bodily aura that rose above the monk and spread over his face. The monk looked up and thought: "What is that?" Then it appeared to him as if the Blessed One had come and stood close by. Seeing this, the monk rose from his seat and paid homage with clasped hands. Then the Master, knowing his fitness, taught Dhamma by speaking this illuminating verse:

"Who severs lust entire,
Like, to the pond descending
One uproots lotus plants,
Such monk 'here' and 'beyond' discards,
As snakes slough outworn skin."

It is interesting to note here that *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna* was simply an unsuitable meditation theme for this young monk. The Buddha directed him first to contemplate *vaṇṇa* (1. colour) which led him to the *subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ*. From *subha*, the Buddha very skillfully brought him back to *asubha* by means of contemplating *dubbaṇṇa*. *Dubbaṇṇa* is a contemplation very closely related to *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*, but it tends much more towards insight.

DUBBAṆṆA

Dubbaṇṇa is, of course, the negative complement of *vaṇṇa*. The PTS dictionary offers this by way of definition – ***dubbaṇṇa***: of bad colour, ugly.

In particular, there is one sense of *vaṇṇa* that denotes the perception of value and beauty we see in things solely on the basis of their appearing whole or complete. There is no real term in English for this, but, as an example, consider the attitude of a new car owner to his car. Generally the relationship is a little strange, compulsive and obsessed until the car gets its first scratch. After that, the sense of *vaṇṇa* abates in the owner's mind and he will begin to relate to his car with a more relaxed perspective.

This sense of *vaṇṇa* is perhaps the most glaringly deluded and false sense of beauty that we have. This is why contemplating *dubbaṇṇa* leads so directly to insight: *dubbaṇṇa* is that very defacement. To perceive *dubbaṇṇa* is to scratch the bubble of delusion.

Perhaps the most illuminating teaching on *dubbaṇṇa* comes from Venerable Ajahn Chah. He gave a short example in his talk "Still, Flowing Water" that has become very famous:

"You say: 'Don't break my glass!' Can you prevent something that's breakable from breaking?... The Buddha says to accept this. Penetrating the truth of these things, he saw that this glass is already broken. The Buddha's understanding was like this. He saw the broken glass within the unbroken one. Whenever you use this glass, you should reflect that it's already broken."

Venerable Ajahn Chah was particularly renowned for his deep understanding of *anicca*, and for good reason. *Anicca* is usually translated into English as "impermanent", but there is a serious flaw in this perspective, with its sense of change over time. As a core principle of the Dhamma (*Dhamma-niyāma*, A.III.134), the truth of *anicca* must conform to the special qualities of the Buddha's Dhamma, especially *akālika*. What is the right way to understand *anicca* when it has 'nothing to do with time'? Venerable Ajahn Chah would use the Thai term "mai neh", usually translated as 'uncertain'. The term used above here for *anicca* is 'unreliable'.

As a brief excursus, incidentally, one of Newton's laws of motion, popularly known as the Law of Inertia, tells us all we need to know about this point. The law states that "A body in motion will tend to stay in motion and a body at rest will tend to stay at rest, *unless it is acted upon by some other force*." This is essentially saying that *time* has no power to change anything; change comes as the result of the action of some condition or other. When people wax philosophical about things and talk about their inevitable

change, there is usually some final comment like, “Yep, it’s just a matter of time.” The appropriate response to this, of course, is: “No. It’s *not* a matter of time at all. It’s a matter of having no reliable foundation.”

The contemplation of *dubbaṇṇa* is to see precisely this point – it is for seeing *anicca* here and now, with no reference to time at all. The Buddha himself taught *dubbaṇṇa* in this way on a few occasions. In addition to the Red Lotus story above, there are the incidents where the great nuns Sundarī-Nandā and Abhirūpa-Nandā were established in Dhamma.

Both of these nuns were very beautiful and great admirers of their own beauty. Such being the case, they were embarrassed to sit before the Blessed One. The Blessed One, knowing their minds, called them, each on separate occasions, to an audience with him. When they were present, he worked a feat of psychic power to produce an image of an incredibly beautiful young woman standing at his side, attending on him. Then, when the attention of the nuns was firmly fixed on this beautiful woman, he proceeded to age her 100 years in a matter of a few seconds.

The unreliability and shallow nature of physical beauty was strongly established as a perception in them, and contemplating this in themselves, they were both able to see Dhamma directly, eventually attaining arahantship (Thig. vv.19-20, 82-86). The Buddha later announced Sundarī-Nandā to be the foremost of his bhikkhunī disciples in the skill of meditation (A.I.14).

Although the teaching of *dubbaṇṇa* is relatively infrequent in the suttas, it is very well ingrained in the teaching of the Vinaya. It’s almost as if the Buddha considered that it wasn’t enough to merely contemplate *dubbaṇṇa*, but as an antidote to the most pernicious of delusions about appearance and beauty, it must be physically brought into one’s life as well. It is one of the quiet fundamentals of the Buddha’s teaching.

“Nisīdana-santhataṃ pana bhikkhunā kārayamānena purāṇa-santhatassa sāmāntā sugati-vidatthi ādātabbā dubbaṇṇa-karaṇāya, anādā ce bhikkhu purāṇa-santhatassa sāmāntā sugati-vidatthiṃ navam nisīdana-santhataṃ kāraṇeyya, nissaggiyaṃ pācittiyaṃ.”

“A bhikkhu making a sitting rug should include a ‘sugata-span’ (approx. 25cm.) of old material all around it (as a border) in order to deface it; should a bhikkhu make a new sitting rug without including a ‘sugata-span’ of old material all around it, it is to be forfeited and confessed.”

NP.15

“Navam pana bhikkhunā cīvara-lābhena tiṇṇaṃ dubbaṇṇa-karaṇānaṃ aññataraṃ dubbaṇṇa-karaṇaṃ ādātabbā, nīlaṃ vā kaddamaṃ vā kāḷa-sāmaṃ vā; anādā ce bhikkhu tiṇṇaṃ dubbaṇṇa-karaṇānaṃ aññataraṃ dubbaṇṇa-karaṇaṃ navam cīvaraṃ paribhuñjeyya, pācittiyaṃ.”

“A bhikkhu receiving a new robe should deface it at three points by one of the means of defacement – with blue, brown or black (marks); should a bhikkhu make use of a new robe that has not been defaced at three points by one of the means of defacement, it is to be confessed.”

P.58

“Na bhikkhave acchinnakāni cīvarāni dhāretabbāni. Yo dhāreyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa-ti... Anujānāmi bhikkhave chinnakaṃ saṅghātiṃ chinnakaṃ uttarā-saṅgaṃ chinnakaṃ antara-vāsakaṃ-ti.”

“Bhikkhus, a robe that has not been cut-up should not be used. Whosoever should use one commits an offense of wrong-doing... Bhikkhus, I allow a cut-up outer robe, a cut-up upper robe, and a cut-up lower robe.”

Mv.11.2,12.2

In addition to this, the commentary to Nissaggiya Pācittiya 21 states that an alms-bowl must be fired (to protect it as well as deface it) before a monk can determine it for use. The commentary to Pārājika 2 adds to this by saying that the gloss or finish on a bowl *must* be spoiled before using it.

All a bhikkhu’s cloth requisites must be defaced, his robes must be made from cut-up cloth, his sitting cloth and rug must have a border of used cloth around it, and his almsbowl must be discoloured, and all this before he even uses them! This is a powerful statement on the importance of contemplating *dubbaṇṇa* – the importance of not being caught up in some deluded sense of the wholeness of things that needs to be protected.

An interesting feature of the stories of the beautiful nuns and the goldsmith's son is that in each case, the disciples are first directed towards beauty as a means of concentrating their attention, before turning their minds to the un-beautiful. Reflecting on *dubbaṇṇa* seems to be based partly on the ability to mentally move back and forth from the standpoint of beauty to the standpoint of non-beauty, with the disparity between these perceptions being the space for insight. In every case, though, the person needs to bring these general insights into his own body and life to turn them into Dhamma.

POWERS OF PERCEPTION: TRANSCENDENCE

The ability, and agility, of mind to move back and forth between the beautiful and the non-beautiful is mentioned, in slightly different terms, as a practice that can bring one to the peak of purity of awareness. Instead of *subha* and *asubha*, the following *sutta* takes a slightly different perspective and speaks about a monk developing the *brahma-vihārā* and then exercising control over the perceptions of *paṭikkūla* and *appaṭikkūla* – the repulsive and the unrepulsive.

“So sace ākaṅkhati appaṭikkūle paṭikkūla-saññī vihareyyanti, paṭikkūla-saññī tattha viharati; sace ākaṅkhati paṭikkūle appaṭikkūla-saññī vihareyyanti, appaṭikkūla-saññī tattha viharati; sace ākaṅkhati appaṭikkūle ca paṭikkūle ca paṭikkūla-saññī vihareyyanti, paṭikkūla-saññī tattha viharati; sace ākaṅkhati paṭikkūle ca appaṭikkūle ca appaṭikkūla-saññī vihareyyanti, appaṭikkūla-saññī tattha viharati; sace ākaṅkhati appaṭikkūlaṅ-ca paṭikkūlaṅ-ca tad ubhayaṃ abhinivajjetvā upekhako vihareyyaṃ sato sampajāno ti, upekhako tattha viharati sato sampajāno.”

“If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the unrepulsive', he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the unrepulsive in the repulsive', he dwells perceiving the unrepulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the unrepulsive and in the repulsive', he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the unrepulsive in the repulsive and in the unrepulsive', he dwells perceiving the unrepulsive therein. If he wishes: 'Avoiding both the unrepulsive and the repulsive, may I dwell equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending,' then he dwells therein equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.”

S.XLVI.54

The commentary explains ‘perceiving the unrepulsive’ by saying that he suffuses the object with *mettā*, but we can also add contemplating the *kaṣiṇa* colours to this. The perception of the repulsive is described as the particular and universal characteristics of the object – the particular characteristics would fall under classical *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna* and the universal characteristics are the *lakkhaṇā*.

This same power over perception is described in the *Indriya-bhāvanā Sutta* (M.152), but rather than the providence of a practising disciple, it is portrayed as the power of an arahant. Equanimity, when coupled with discernment, naturally becomes not only a divine abiding but also a factor of enlightenment, turning equanimity into liberation.

“Upekkhā-sambojjaṅgam-bhāveti viveka-virāga-nirodha-nissitaṃ vipulaṃ mahaggataṃ appamāṇaṃ abyāpajjaṃ. So upekkhā-sambojjaṅgam-bhāvitena anibbiddha-pubbaṃ appadālita-pubbaṃ lobha-k-khandhaṃ nibbijjhati padāleti. Anibbiddha-pubbaṃ appadālita-pubbaṃ dosa-k-khandhaṃ nibbijjhati padāleti. Anibbiddha-pubbaṃ appadālita-pubbaṃ moha-k-khandhaṃ nibbijjhati padāleti.”

“He develops the enlightenment factor of equanimity, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion and cessation; which is vast, exalted, immeasurable, without ill-will. With a mind that has developed the enlightenment factor of equanimity, he penetrates and sunders the mass of greed that he has never before penetrated and sundered; he penetrates the mass of hatred that he has never before penetrated and sundered; he penetrates the mass of delusion that he has never before penetrated and sundered.”

S.XLVI.28

Moving from colour to beauty, beauty to non-beauty, one compares and contrasts these perceptions until equanimity arises, providing the clearest possible seeing in the mind. The last stage is purification – sundering greed, hatred and delusion while moving from the symbolic *odāta* ‘white’ of equanimity to the symbolic *sabba-seta* ‘pure white’ of unsurpassed release. Recall the dream of the bodhisatta: like a bird alighting on the ground at the Buddha's feet, this is rest and release at last.

POSTSCRIPT

Although the Buddha declared that his holy life had Nibbāna as its ground, he also, of course, stood on the earthen ground of this world. Similarly, although true beauty exists in a unified mind, it is not that case that the Buddha and his disciples did not see any beauty in the world.

Just as natural light comes only from the sun, yet the moon still shines as a result of reflecting the sun's radiance, even so, there are things in the world regarded as beautiful as a result of their being supportive conditions for the development of the mind. There is a pāli word, *kalyāṇa*, that is reserved for this sense of beauty, and it occurs often in the suttas. The PTS dictionary gives these meanings – ***kalyāṇa***: 1. beautiful, charming; auspicious, helpful, morally good, 2. a) a good or useful thing, good things, b) goodness, virtue, merit, meritorious action, c) kindness, good service, d) beauty, attraction, perfection.

All one's teachers, especially the Buddha, are referred to as *kalyāṇa-mittā*: beautiful friends (S.XLV.2). The Dhamma, the teaching of the Lord Buddha, is described as *ādi-kalyāṇam majjhe-kalyāṇam pariyosāna-kalyāṇam*: beautiful in its beginning, beautiful in its middle, and beautiful in its culmination (M.27). Other supportive things in the world are also described as beautiful and capable of delighting the minds of the wise: generosity, virtue, non-anger and non-resentment, compassion, renunciation, social harmony, devas, forest groves, wild places, empty huts.

A FINAL WORD

When the Buddha talked about the qualities that are regular features of the life of an *ariya-sāvaka*, a noble disciple, one group that would often come up was the *catur-āpassena* – the four things to depend on.

“Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sankhāy’ekam paṭisevati, sankhāy’ekam adhivāseti, sankhāy’ekam parivajjeti, sankhāy’ekam vinodeti.”

“Here bhikkhus, a bhikhu, after reflection, pursues something; after reflection, lives with something; after reflection, avoids something; or, after reflection, drives out something.” **A.X.20**

It is a very useful teaching because it suggests that, with a little reflection, there is always some appropriate action or relationship for any situation or any state; an action and relationship that accords with Dhamma.

Four types of beauty have been discussed here – *subham vimokham*, the beautiful liberation; *kalyāṇa*, the reflected beauty of wholesome supports; *vaṇṇa*, the beauty of things perceived as complete; and *subha-saññā*, the beauty perceived in things themselves. These four types of beauty can be discerned in the practice of the Buddha's teaching:

Subham vimokkham paṭisevasi;

Kalyāṇena adhivāsesi;

Vaṇṇam parivajjesi;

Subha-saññam vinodesi.

Liberating beauty you follow;

With reflected beauty, you stand your ground;

From the beauty of completeness, you walk away;

And to beauty in things – you throw it down.

Hāsapañño Bhikhu

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Wat Pah Nanachat