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6.500 light years away across the universe lies a region of the cosmos known as the Eagle Nebula.

Recently the James Webb Space Telescope focused on the Eagle Nebula to produce dramatically beautiful images of what are known as The Pillars of Creation.

In one description the Pillars of Creation are said to ‘look like arches and spires rising out of a desert landscape’.

A closer examination of the Pillars reveals an ever-changing battle of creation and destruction.

A race is taking place. As dense clouds of gas and dust collapse to form new stars, already formed stars work to blow the cloud away and bring star formation to an end.

Creation and destruction combine to create complexity and magnificent beauty.

Closer to home, you might be walking through the forest when you come across the terrible smell of a rotting carcass of a dead animal, full of maggots. You might turn away in revulsion at the ugly scene.

And yet, if you were to shift your perspective of space and time, you might be able to see how the rotting carcass dissolves and recycles into the earth, the maggots turn into flies and become food for birds. From this perspective you might be able to see beauty in the ugly destruction of the dead animal.

Throughout the cosmos creation and destruction, ugliness and beauty exist side by side.

How does Buddhism relate to the notions of ugliness and beauty?

Sangharakshita, in the chapter ‘The Nature of Existence’ in his book “The Three Jewels”, writes about ugliness and beauty in Buddhism.

The word for ugly in Buddhism is *Aśubha*. *Aśubha* means not only ugly but also horrid, disgusting, repulsive, or impure.

Aśubha is derived from the word *Śubha*. *Śubha* is the word in Buddhism for beauty. (The letter ‘A’ in this context is a negative prefix.)

Śubha literally means ‘purity’, but can mean beauty, though beauty of the spiritual kind rather than the material or sensuous kind.

But what does it mean when Buddhism teaches that all conditioned things are *aśubha*, are ugly? Does this mean that when we see through to the gateway of true, spiritual beauty, *śubha*, we see all the world around us ugly? No, this is not what it means. Sangharakshita explains:

“When Buddhism insists that all conditioned things are *aśubha*, it does not mean that we have to regard a flower, for instance, as essentially ugly, but only that in comparison with the beauties of a higher plane of reality those of a lower plane are insignificant. Beauty and ugliness are relative terms.”

Something of this is captured in the poem by Mahakassapa, one of the Buddha’s most senior enlightened disciples, as he tells us how much he enjoys the beauty of nature.

At Home In The Mountains

Strung with garlands of flowering vines,
This patch of earth delights the mind;
The lovely calls of elephants sound —
These rocky crags do please me so!

The shimmering hue of darkening clouds,
Cool waters in pure streams flowing;
Enveloped by Indra's ladybugs —
These rocky crags do please me so!

Like the lofty peaks of looming clouds,
Like the most refined of palaces;
The lovely calls of tuskers sound —
These rocky crags do please me so!

The lovely ground is rained upon,
The hills are full of holy seers;
Resounding with the cry of peacocks —
These rocky crags do please me so!

Being clothed in flaxen flowers,
As the sky is covered in clouds;
Strewn with flocks of various birds —
These rocky crags do please me so!

Not occupied by village folk,
But visited by herds of deer;

Strewn with flocks of various birds —
These rocky crags do please me so!
With clear waters and broad boulders,
Holding troops of monkey and deer;
Covered with moist carpets of moss —
These rocky crags do please me so!

[But] there is not so much contentment
For me in the five-fold music,
As in truly seeing Dhamma
With a well-concentrated mind.

(Translated by Andrew Olendzki)

Maha Kassapa Thera

After spending much of the poem in describing the pleasure obtained in the beauty of nature, in the last verse, Mahakassapa, (almost as an afterthought it must be said!), reminds himself that the pleasures and beauty to be experienced through the five physical senses, are much less than the beauty experienced in meditative insight into the true nature of reality.

Sangharakshita makes the same point when he reminds us of the story of Nanda and the heavenly nymphs from the Udana.

“The Lord said to the venerable Nanda: ‘You admit it is true that without zest you fare the Brahma-faring, that you cannot endure it, and that, throwing off the training, you will return to the low life. How is this?’

Revered sir, when I left my home a Śākyan girl, the fairest in the land, with hair half combed, looked back at me and said: "May you soon be back again, young master." Revered sir, as I am always thinking of that, I have no zest for the Brahma-faring, can't endure it, and, throwing off the training, will return to the low life.’

Then the Lord, taking the venerable Nanda by the arm, as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or might bend back his outstretched arm, vanishing from the Jeta Grove, appeared among

the Devas of the Thirty-Three. At that time as many as five hundred nymphs were come to minister to Sakka, the lord of devas, and they were called 'dove-footed'. The Lord asked the venerable Nanda which he thought the more lovely, worth looking at and charming, the Śākyan girl, the fairest in the land, or these five hundred nymphs called 'dove-footed'.

'O, revered sir, just as if she were a mutilated monkey with ears and nose cut off, even so the Śākyan girl, the fairest in the land, if set beside these five hundred nymphs called "dove-footed", is not worth a fraction of them, cannot be compared with them. Why, these five hundred nymphs are far more lovely, worth looking at and charming.'¹

(I.B. Horner (trans.), *Udāna* iii.2; E. Conze (ed.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, Harper and Row, New York 1964, p.35.)

In Buddhist cosmology the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods (the Devas of the Thirty-Three) sits just above the world of human beings; but regarded even from this level the loveliest human face is as nothing compared to those of the nymphs.

And if one were to ascend to even higher planes of existence in Buddhist cosmology then the beauty of the nymphs would be as nothing to the beauty experienced in the higher planes.

What the Buddha is by implication referring to is the beauty that can be experienced in the higher states of consciousness that can be accessed in meditation, in what we call the dhyanas. This is what Mahakassapa is referring to in the final verse of his poem.

Sangharakshita adds an interesting observation from traditional Buddhist meditation techniques on how to attain the dhyanas:

"The type of meditation exercise that will help one to realize this personally by ascending into the *dhyānas* and actually seeing the lower ranges of conditioned existence as *aśubha* differs according to temperament. The *lobhacaritra* or 'passionate temperament', which tends to concentrate on the bright side of life ignoring the dark, and in which greed and attachment therefore predominate, will find the *aśubhabhāvanā* helpful. This method consists in contemplating the ten progressive stages of decomposition of a corpse. The *dveṣacaritra* or

‘malevolent temperament’, which sees the bad side of everything, and in which aversion predominates, on the contrary will be helped by concentrating on discs of pure bright beautiful colours such as those of flowers. One of passionate temperament should never begin by concentrating on attractive objects, which in his case will stimulate greed, nor one of malevolent temperament on repulsive objects, which in him will excite hatred, and greed and hatred are hindrances to meditation.”

But whichever path is followed, from the perspective of the higher planes or the dhyanas, the beauty experienced there far exceeds the beauty we experience in our normal conditioned experience.

I have to admit to personally feeling uncomfortable with describing the beauty of what we experience in our normal, conditioned experience as ‘ugly’, or even as ‘insignificant’. It’s one thing for Nanda to say that the five hundred nymphs are ‘far more lovely, worth looking at and charming.’ It’s another thing for him to describe the Sakyan girl ‘as if she were a mutilated monkey with ears and nose cut off’.

This is a tension which exists in Buddhism generally. Sangharakshita puts it this way:

“Unfortunately, the specific function of those practices which focus attention on the repulsive and disgusting aspects of existence, as well as their special relation to one type of temperament, is not always understood even by Buddhist writers, some of whom appear to believe that according to Buddhism ugliness is real and beauty unreal and that one progresses in the spiritual life merely by seeing more and more ugliness and less and less beauty everywhere and at all levels of existence. As a well-known Sri Lankan Thera remarked to the writer once when shown an album of Tibetan religious paintings, ‘I’m afraid that being a monk I’m not allowed to appreciate beauty.’ Such strange misunderstandings, though current in some modern Theravādin circles, are easily refuted even from the Pāli scriptures.”

As the Buddha himself puts it:

“Now, Bhaggava,... certain recluses and brahmins have abused me with groundless, empty lies that have no truth in them, saying: ‘Gotama the recluse and his brethren have gone astray. For Gotama the recluse teaches this:

"When one reaches up to the Release, called the Beautiful, and having reached it abides therein, at such a time he regards the Whole (Universe) as ugly."

But I never said that, Bhaggava. This is what I do say: 'Whenever one reaches up to the Release, called the Beautiful, then he knows indeed what Beauty is.'

(F.L. Woodward (trans.), *Dīgha-Nikāya* iii.34-5, in *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, Buddhist Society, London 1973, p.139.)

This leads Sangharakshita to argue that awareness of beauty, a positive factor, should predominate over awareness of ugliness, a negative factor, in the Buddhist spiritual life. There are degrees of beauty from the sensuous to the spiritual, and from the spiritual to the Transcendental.

In one of his last pieces of writing Sangharakshita picks up this theme and talks about 'The Path of Beauty'.

Sangharakshita argues that whilst it is true that historically Buddhism has not developed a full spiritual path in which the goal is envisaged in terms of ideal beauty and the path in terms of increasing love for that beauty, he believes that drawing upon the western spiritual and cultural traditions there is no reason why such a path should not be developed.

"Historically speaking, Buddhism has not developed a spiritual path in which the goal is envisaged in terms of ideal beauty and the path in terms of increasing love for that beauty. There is no reason, however, why such a path should not be developed within the general framework of Buddhist practice, especially as we have models for such an approach within the Western spiritual tradition. The *locus classicus* of such an approach is to be found in the *Symposium* of Plato (427-347 BCE), one of the most sublime works of Western literature. In this celebrated dialogue, known to me since my teens, Socrates represents himself as being instructed in the art of love by Diotima. In her instruction, the object of love is beauty, both human and divine. A similar approach is to be found in the writings of Plotinus (204/5 – 270 CE). In his tractate 'On Beauty', he says:

"Beauty is mostly in sight, but it is to be found too in things we hear, in combinations of words and also in music, and in all music [not only in songs]; for tunes and rhythms are certainly beautiful: and for those who are advancing upwards from sense perception, ways of life and actions and characters and intellectual activities are beautiful, and there is

beauty of virtue. If there is any beauty prior to these, it itself will reveal it.”

This is a path that I find more appealing. The path is not to bluntly see asubha, a fourth lakshana, as ‘ugliness’ in stark contrast to subha, a fourth gateway to liberation, as ‘beauty’. Rather it is to see beauty as a continuous and progressive path to a gateway to liberation. This is much more in tune with my temperament, and I suspect with the temperament of others.